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# The Cynic Sensibility in British Popular Literature and Culture, 1950 to 1987

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# Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis, submitted in candidature for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, and the research contained herein is of my own composition, except where explicitly stated in the text, and was not previously submitted for any other degree or professional qualification at this or any other university.

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Kieran Curran, 2013

# Abstract

In my thesis, I focus on delineating 'The Cynic Sensibility' in British Popular Literature and Culture (1950-1987). Focusing primarily on literature and music (and, to a lesser extent, cinema/television), this work seeks to write a cultural history through analysing cultural texts. The sensibility has three key characteristics: i) it is a Bohemian sensibility; ii) it is apolitical, in that it does not endorse any political alternative to the status quo at any given time, and iii) it is popular, and exists across traditional high/low cultural lines. Connected to this last point is a tendency to oppose stylistic Modernism and its attendant obscurities. Underpinning my thesis are the work of the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk on cynicism as a philosophical phenomenon, and the cultural theory of Raymond Williams. Using this approach, I seek to not only connect spheres of culture which hitherto have been kept separate, but to provide a different insight into 20<sup>th</sup> century British cultural history.

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## Introduction

In the following work I wish to look at the sensibility of the cynic in British Popular Culture, from the 1950s onwards. Focusing primarily on literature, music and (to a lesser extent) cinema and television, this sensibility progresses and changes as time goes on, with some works explicitly or implicitly referencing previous cynic works. This project contains eight case studies of the cynic of more or less equal length, as well as two more extended sections – one on John Osborne, particularly in relation to *The Entertainer*, and one on Comedy and the cynic sensibility. Each writer and period has a distinctive feel – the art produced is indebted to the times from which it came, and just as Charles Dickens is tied to Victorian England, Kingsley Amis couldn't have existed without early 1950s post war/imperial ennui, nor would Morrissey's words have been written without the recession of the late 1970s/early 1980s (not to mention the D.I.Y impulse of punk). In a similar manner to Raymond Williams's seminal *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), this work seeks to write a cultural history through analysing cultural texts - in a sense, to look to “the words and sequences of words which particular men and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience” (18); although, as it will become clear, I do not wish to focus on simply words alone. As Catherine Belsey suggests in her seminal essay ‘Towards Cultural History’, “if we can interpret Shakespeare, we can surely learn to



interpret fashion, and music" (166). This book aims to integrate a broad range of cultural reference points, rather than simply straightforward close reading.

Yet the term cynic might sound oddly vague and colloquial as the subject for an academic work. Is a cynic not simply any armchair pundit, confident in his or her assertions, drink in one hand and remote control in the other? In this case, the sensibility of the cynic might not seem a just case for analysis, given the predominance of this character type. A more extensive description of this tendency may be found as part of the *Untimely Meditations* of Friedrich Nietzsche:

Close beside the pride of modern man there stands his ironic view of himself, his awareness that he has to live in an historicizing, as it were a twilight mood, his fear that his youthful hopes and energy will not survive into the future. Here and there one goes further, into cynicism, and justifies the course of history, indeed the entire evolution of the world, in a manner especially adapted to the use of modern man, according to the cynical canon: as things are they had to be, as men now are they bound to become, none may resist this inevitability (107).

Thus, in Nietzsche's negative definition of cynicism, there is a terminal, unchangeable, immutable aspect to it. It also could be argued that the cynic sensibility is evident *everywhere* in British culture. This is not to mention the fact that, historically, Britain has produced artists of various degrees of contrariness who could also be termed cynics. What are the common threads which tie together the figures I am analysing,

and what are the key aspects that bring disparate, broadly cynical artists such as John Osborne, John Lennon, Stephen Poliakoff and Mark E. Smith together?

Before I offer a set definition, now I think it may be useful to refer back to the literature of sensibility somewhat. Janet Todd, in her 1986 book *Sensibility*, identifies aspects crucial to the genre as being "the arousal of pathos through conventional situations, stock familial characters and rhetorical devices" (2). The novel of sensibility "reveals a belief in the appealing and aesthetic quality of virtue, displayed in a naughty world through a vague and potent distress... the distressed are natural victims" (2-3). There is a link here between the works I am analysing and this aspect of the concept of sensibility, in that each work presents a narrator, hero or central character who is - to some extent - an outsider, or downtrodden. This is presented as being a result of banal, ordinary circumstances and not from a tragic flaw - their peripheral nature seems normal and "as it is". More evident in Morrissey's music or in Lennon's solo outpourings than in the examples I have gleaned from 1950s literature, a sense of victimhood in these texts is offset by humour and a certain defiance. Where the outsider role is more crucial, and seems to be popular in galvanising an idea of youth culture can be seen in the accounts of the creation of the catch-all term of 'Angry Young Men' in Humphrey Carpenter's *The Angry Young Men - A Literary Comedy of the 1950s*, Randall Stevenson's *The Last Of England?*, and more contemporaneous accounts of mid to late 1950s drama by John Russell Taylor (*Anger And After*) and Kenneth Allsopp (*The Angry Decade*).

Todd quotes Leslie Stephen in his naming sensibility as "the mood in which we make a luxury of grief" (7) - this could be a reference to The Smiths' lyrics two centuries on. There is an ascetic aspect to the man of sensibility which Todd argues is a result of the shifting of its grounds from a link between sexuality and sensitivity to a chaste, *Pamela* derived idea:

As sensibility became more firmly connected with women in the later eighteenth century, it tended to lose the association with sexuality even for men, and the sensibility of the Man of Feeling is physically a matter of tears and gestures, precluding lustiness (8).

In a sense, this seems a model for Morrissey's public image up until the recent past - the "ultimate patient", according to Michael Bracewell (*England Is Mine* 220). Indeed, Raymond Williams' takes the term (as it is described above) into the 20th century with a description in *Keywords* of sensibility "as an apparently neutral term in discussion of the sources of art, without the *difficult* overtones of *mind* or the specializations of *thought* or *feeling*" (283). This leads us on to Williams' concept of a "structure of feeling", as described in *The Long Revolution*, signifying as it does "a particular sense of life...(operating) in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity" (64). In this respect, analysis of the arts, "taking these to include characteristic approaches and tones in argument, are of major importance" (65). Although he acknowledges the word sensibility's decline from fashionable usage, I feel that his structure of feeling concept, along with the original definition are - to a great extent - useful in this work, as both denote the historical bases of certain forms

of artistic expression, as well as the importance of the idea of individual sense and taste to the production of cultural artifacts.

Following on from this, the sensibility as I see it has three key, defined characteristics. Firstly, it is a *Bohemian sensibility*, which is opposed to the conventional pursuit of wealth/material success which characterises British capitalist society. The cynic does not believe in the benefits of participating in the rat race – indeed, characters in the cultural texts I analysed often drop out entirely, living either on the lower end of the socio-economic ladder (the hero Charles Lumley self-consciously choosing prestige-free jobs such as a window cleaner, a hospital orderly etcetera in John Wain's *Hurry On Down*) or even existing on the lunatic fringes of society (the eco-terrorists of Stephen Poliakoff's *Strawberry Fields*). Characters in these texts often resemble a less Romantic version of Oscar Wilde's belief, articulated in 'The Soul Of Man Under Socialism', that "the primary aim of his (man's) life is self development" (284). Something of the flaneur pops up here in this Bohemian conception - Hannah Arendt's characterisation of late 19th century Parisian society's "strolling, idling, *flanerie*" (27) for instance, or Raymond Williams' view of George Orwell as being both "exile and vagrant" (*Culture and Society* 280). Yet outright bohemians generally appear as parody - an entirely bohemian central character is not really to be seen within the prism of the cynic sensibility. There is also an element of Romanticism in how the cynic sees him or herself – that their artistic output provides, as Andrew Bennett puts it, "a view of the poet's interior, his or her mind or heart" (48). Reveling in an 'authentic' reflection of human experience, works authored by the

cynic set out to appear genuine, grounded in 'reality'; written for themselves and no-one else. This is connected to an exceptionalism, which entails the artist seeing themselves as having a privileged gaze above the norm. This sense of distinction categorises much popular music also; Simon Frith has written extensively of this tendency within Rock discourse:

Critics value a performance if they can hear it as the authentic expression of feeling, and the clearer and more intense the feeling, the better. At the most naïve level this means listening to lyrics as if they were about their singers' own experiences, but even sophisticated critics listen for sincerity. Rock creativity, in describing an individual sensibility, is contrasted to the soulless formulas of pop (*Sound Effects* 161).

Secondly, the cynic sensibility is *apolitical*, in that it does not endorse any specific political alternative to the status quo at a given time. Kingsley Amis shifted from a left-leaning to right wing perspective over time, whilst John Osborne participated in Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and anti-Suez invasion protests, only later becoming a polemical outsider; John Lennon flirted with leftist revolutionary politics, but only briefly. Underlying this is a sense that political allegiances are fleeting and not all that worthwhile – the eponymous character of Dennis Potter's television play *Vote Vote Vote For Nigel Barton* begins as an idealist but is constantly being forced to adopt a different shtick to satisfy the whims of the voting public; the system demands it. The cynic, in response, remains aloof from politicking – thus, Morrissey in the 1980s is perhaps anti-Thatcher or 'anti-establishment', but not on a par with the likes

of Billy Bragg, Red Wedge or more active supporters of the miners' strike etc. Bragg himself was referencing this absurdity himself by 1988 in his song 'Waiting For The Great Leap Forward' - "mixing pop and politics, they ask me what the use is, I offer them embarrassment and my usual excuses". To quote Wilde once more, in a section of 'The Soul Of Man Under Socialism' where he implies his approval for any form of politics which supports cultural (i.e artistic) activity: "There is this to be said in favour of the despot, that he, being an individual, has culture, whereas the mob, being a monster, has none" (282).

A final point needs to be made in relation to the apolitical nature of the cynic. I have tried to be rigid in my treatment of cultural texts in relation to this, not being content with consistently - and retrospectively - over-analysing texts in order to render them works of agit-prop. The idea underpinning this is to oppose the often lazy contention that everything, by virtue of its very existence – or, better yet, by virtue of a salient subplot – is political. Relevant as Michel Foucault's contention that "politics is no more or less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first uprising, the first confrontation" (*Security, Territory, Population*, 390) is, formulations such as this immeasurably help critics fond of ascribing politically 'engaged' significance to anything they feel inclined to read or critique in expressly political terms. By contrast, examples of the cynic sensibility are apolitical in the sense that they do not see any particular value or possibilities in political *action*, rather than being said to embody a political pose through demonstrating a modicum of tonal dissent, or "born with resistance".

Lastly, and crucially, it is also popular, and exists across traditional high/low cultural lines; in this sense, it is anti-modernist. Writing primarily in reference to modernist literature, Peter Childs defines the form as “a clear movement towards increased sophistication, studied mannerism, profound introversion, technical display, self-scepticism and general anti-representationalism” (22). In terms of musical modernism, the philosophy of the experimental post WWII classical composer (and sometime conductor/critic) Pierre Boulez is worth noting here. “History”, Boulez stated, “as it is made by great composers is not a history of conservation but of destruction” (21); here is a clear distillation of the importance of novelty and the avant-garde to the modernist. Denseness and complexity are also of paramount importance: “Whether it be a book, a picture or a piece of music...polyvalent levels of interpretation are fundamental to my conception of the work” (25). Boulez’s general opposition to contemporary tendencies towards aping musical forms of the past was a crystallised philosophical position, and symptomatic of cultural *decline*:

I believe that a civilisation which tends towards conservatism is a declining civilisation because it is afraid to go forward and ascribes more importance to its memories than to its future...From this viewpoint, our musical civilisation shows very distinct signs of decay since at all levels its emphasis on reclamation, even when wrapped in very general and broad considerations, shows that it has too many memories (33).

In contrast to these positions, the cynic does not write words in an overly modernist style or (generally) compose music in a self-consciously experimental manner; assembling films of chopping up eyeballs are also out of the question. He or she does not concentrate on displaying virtuosity generally (even if he or she possesses it, or *hints* at it), incorporating humour within their texts, and seeking to communicate with a relatively large audience. This is perhaps “conservative” in a sense; the cynic may - in response - see this approach as an exemplar of “common sense” (whatever the nebulousness and historic specificity of this term).

The perspective of Philip Larkin - particularly in his role as a jazz critic - sharply contrasts with Boulez’s position, or the definition of modernism presented by Childs, and thus is emblematic of the cynic sensibility as a whole. In his introduction to his collected writings on jazz *All What Jazz*, Larkin pinpoints what is his essential antipathy towards what he considers to be the modernist impulse:

I dislike such things not because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it. This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetrated by Parker, Pound or Picasso: it helps us neither to enjoy nor endure. It will divert us as long as we are prepared to be mystified or outraged, but maintains its hold only by being more mystifying and more outrageous: it has no lasting power (27).



It seems that the above quotation sums up the cynic sensibility's antipathy towards modernism best of all; it identifies a palpable need for comprehensibility over 'mystification' in art. Whether through the plays of John Osborne in the mid-1950s, or through the interest of The Smiths in producing successful 7" pop singles, - even in Iris Murdoch's depictions of London existentialist café culture in *Under The Net* - the cynic does not seek to be a wilful obscurantist. Alan Sinfield's cultural critique of the post-war settlement has a similar slant - "placing 'good' culture alongside the discourses of imperialism and the Cold War, sexuality and the family, jazz and rock music" (*Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 3). In a sense, the progression mapped by the cynic sensibility reflects the drift towards recent modern, or postmodern culture - as Strinati and Wagg identify, "culturally, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish satisfactorily between serious and trivial culture, between high and low culture, between popular and mass culture, between authentic and inauthentic culture, or between popular culture and art" (1).

Tied in with this sense of the evening out of high/low cultural distinctions is a certain attachment to "the people" as an abstract entity. Philip Larkin (the starting point of my discussion of the cynic) frequently mentions his dislike of library customers and their unsophisticated reading habits in his *Selected Letters*; at the same time, some of his work idealises "the people" (the pre-WWI characters in his poem '1914'), or views their lives with a degree of sympathy (the depiction of John Kemp's family in *Jill*). Mark E. Smith and Morrissey both have artistic connections with the "salt of the earth" of their Salford/Manchester backgrounds, respectively. They -

likewise – have consistently and publicly identified themselves as being working class. Even Sebastian Dangerfield – the lascivious protagonist of J.P. Donleavy's 1955 novel *The Ginger Man* (a work similar in tone in some respects to *Lucky Jim*, but set in Ireland) - expresses admiration for the small talk that the ordinary Irish “peasant” (as he terms them on occasion) engages in. There is a sense in which it is a nationalistic impulse - as Benedict Anderson includes as part of his definition of the imagined community of a nation state, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each (society), the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (*Imagined Communities*, 7); nostalgia also prevails in the cynic's tendency towards viewing the past as representing a sort of prelapsarian, imagined “good old days”. At any rate, the cynic sensibility has definite characteristics that are measurable through textual analysis, not to mention in a more theoretical sense.

Why the term cynic? There are two reasons for this. The first is the Cynic school of philosophy which originated in the Ancient Greek world. Cynicism was a school devoted to “preaching voluntary poverty, self-sufficiency, and independence” (Desmond, 9); not a million miles away from a certain kind of Bohemian ideal. According to classicist William Desmond, the outlook of the Cynic can be encapsulated as follows:

The traditional gods are unreal; war is evil; patriotism and duty mere words; Academics and other intellectuals are fakes or snobs; the masses are fools too often deluded by whatever they are told. Not seeking a higher truth or the common safety, the Cynic is a thorough individualist (21).

The above quotation - particularly the debunking of intellectuals, a search for 'higher truth' and the veneration of the individual spirit - dovetails with the cynic sensibility of this dissertation. On this note, there also needs to be taken into account the cynicism characterised by postmodern philosopher and art critic Peter Sloterdijk – namely, cynicism as a widespread phenomenon, affecting one and all in late capitalist society. Sloterdijk's major work - *The Critique Of Cynical Reason* - argued that cynicism was a “universal, diffuse” (3) phenomenon, evident in every aspect of contemporary capitalist society . This was a by-product of a failed belief in a positivist, Enlightenment-inspired way of seeing. Appropriately, his writings on this subject came in the wake of the 1970s comedown from the apparent seas of possibilities of the 1960s (writer Francis Wheen colourfully categorised the 1970s as a “pungent *mélange* of apocalyptic dread and conspiratorial fever” [9]). Criticisms of the Enlightenment were nothing new, and Sloterdijk's book was a reaction to the major work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic Of Enlightenment*. However, what was new was Sloterdijk's belief in the role of the 'kynic' (a kind of playful, mocking character Sloterdijk sees as being akin to the original cynic Diogenes) to subvert the mass cynicism prevalent in Western society, through a mocking of conservative capitalist ideology, pulling faces at pretension and generally seeking to kick against the predominant view of the isolated, individualist, bourgeois subject. It mocks the illusion of the idea of a capitalistic, acquisitive middle class

conception of liberty and freedom (with every household an island), in much the same way that Karl Marx did in his *Grundrisse*:

..the absurdity of considering free competition as being the final development of human liberty, and the negation of free competition as being the negation of individual liberty and of social production founded on individual liberty. It is only free development on a limited foundation – that of the dominion of capital. This kind of individual liberty is thus at the same time the most complete suppression of all individual liberty and total subjugation of individuality to social conditions which take the form material forces...The assertion that free competition is the final form of development of productive forces, and thus of human freedom, means only that the domination of the middle class is the end of the world's history (153).

There are obvious problems, as Andreas Huyssens states in his foreword to the Critique. How can the figure of Diogenes, a notorious loner, inspire a sincere denial of the subject? Also, are Sloterdijk's extolling of the virtues of the kynic just an easy way out of political engagement: "to what extent Diogenesian protest gestures could be more effective politically than traditional ideology critique combined with organized mass protests and group politics?" (xviii). Sloterdijk's proposal of mocking reaction - which amongst other things tries also to reclaim the body as against the reification of "the head" (intellect) - all the same dovetails with a sense of a disenfranchisement from, and a reaction to, mainstream group politics.

To return to the cultural texts in question, reflecting a playful cynicism against elite behaviour, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* kicks against a gentrified form of high culture, criticising the artistic pretensions of Bertrand Welch, as well as the "phony madrigals" of his father the Professor. However, what better way to express a kynical point of view than through creative art, where the writer has the most freedom to say as he or she pleases (taking into account, of course, editorial considerations). There were certain potentially obvious authors and artists that I omitted as part of this lineage. To address some of these omissions, *Room At The Top* by John Braine was left out because the novel entails more of a dedicated engagement and compromise with the capitalist system and the pursuit of success. *Absolute Beginners* (and the other London novels by Colin Macinnes) is, I feel, formally more modernist and cutting edge, despite being to some extent rooted in realism and the depiction of the social tensions inherent in Britain in the multiracial 1950s. Likewise, the plays of Harold Pinter and the 1960s fiction of B.S Johnson have more modernist/experimental tendencies, but were also comparatively unpopular. The Kinks were excluded because of a sense of an absence of a real cynical voice within their songs, and their tendency (exemplified by *The Village Green Preservation Society*) towards rose-tinted nostalgia towards a bygone English age. 1970s playwrights David Hare and Trevor Griffiths were not included because of their more overt, left-wing political outlooks. The Cure in the 1980s were excluded for not representing as much of a defined lyrical voice, from their initial punk influenced work to the heavily Goth-influenced *Disintegration* in the late 1980s.

There are certainly problematic issues with analysing literature, film, television and music respectively as common cultural texts. Influenced by the sadly declining field of Cultural Studies, my methodology was to analyse - as well as to seek to integrate together - the texts of novels, plays, poems, artist/author biographies, autobiography, song lyrics, dramatic dialogue, performance theory, media interviews, album/single cover art, social/cultural histories, literary criticism, popular musicology and philosophy/cultural theory. Cultural materialist Catherine Belsey put it succinctly in her essay 'Towards Cultural History': "the cultural history I should like to see us produce would refuse nothing" (Belsey, 60). These respective texts commonly relate to interconnecting discourses around politics, gender and class. Again, following Raymond Williams, I wish to see these differing texts as being rooted not only in the material conditions of British society at the time, but also demonstrating a shifting "structure of feeling" within culture as a whole way of life. However, in doing so, I am certainly not attempting to disregard the specificity of the form of each separate work of art. Thus, I do not seek to analyse pop lyrics in an overtly literary fashion, treating them as if they were only poetic words on a page, and ignoring the formal significance of the performing voice (what Roland Barthes termed "the impossible thrill that I constantly experience in listening to singing" ['The Grain Of The Voice', 181]), as well as the musical production/backing. Popular music can condense a lyrical sentiment and melodic ideas into a concise, condensed (say three minutes, approximately) form. Literature, by contrast, has an advantage of having more space in which to describe the interior life of the subject, and extended

extrapolation on private, personal motives. Episodes of *The Young Ones* are constituent parts of a series as a whole, subject to a different kind of plot trajectory (often subverted within each episode) that is quite distinct from the relatively coherent narratives of the films of the British New Wave. Film can articulate scene and human gestures often far more easily than words on a page, whilst cinematographers, grips, costume et al are equally crucial to the realisation of cinema and TV alike. This is not to mention the significance of financial support; arguably, this same level of contextual input is less crucial with regard to the writing of a novel, or the production of a play. In sum, each have their own individual attributes, and I wish to not privilege any one over the other; aesthetic judgments based on traditionally “high”/“low” culture positions are irrelevant - I am concerned with attempting to analyse these cultural texts in the context of their relation to British history, not to compile a league table of aesthetically approved artifacts. Thus, my attempt is to avoid a situation where - as Catherine Belsey identifies in *Critical Practice* - “departments of literature come to function like consumers' associations whose main purpose is to write reports advising readers on the best (spiritual) buys” (127).

Friedrich Nietzsche, in his essay 'On the uses and disadvantages of history for life' (1874), delineates three central forms of historical study – monumental (concerned with describing the great, progression of achievements by Man), antiquarian (concerned preserving localised sites of significance) and critical. This final category Nietzsche posits - critical history - is the one which I myself have been influenced by.

For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away (76).

Connected with this concept of critically interpreting history are ideas of 'historical materialism' by Walter Benjamin. In thesis XVI of his 'Theses On The Philosophy Of History', Benjamin writes: "Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past" (254). This sense of a dialectic between the writer of a work of history and the raw materials he or she works with is something which I hope to have brought out in this text; hopefully, a unique experience has been articulated. In Benjamin's closing words from thesis VII, "he regards it as his task to brush history against the grain" (248).

In the writings of the authors I am looking at, music (especially) and cinema (to a lesser extent) play a significant part. Larkin was a jazz critic and avid movie-goer (analysing both in similar ways, judging by some of his letters to his friends), Osborne a lover of jazz; conversely, there is a literary autodidact in Mark E. Smith, John Lennon and Morrissey, and Billy Fisher wants to write songs or comedy as a way out of a provincial dead end in *Billy Liar*. Within these cultural texts, words alone are not a definitive end in themselves, and the same sensibility, the same energy bursts forth



from all, whether on paper, film or vinyl – channeling Bakhtin, “it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (76). Far from purporting to be a definitive account of the post WWII period (not that such a thing could be said to exist), this work is a cultural historical project on a structure of feeling's development within British culture in a given period, based on specific common themes and tendencies.

## Chapter 1 – *Annus Mirabilis*

In the immediate post World War II period, life was understandably more disturbed in Britain than before. People had been subject to the onslaught of the Blitz, and had grown more unified in the face of this. Bombing ceased after 1943, however, and after this part of the war faded away, the realities of rationing and frugality kicked in with increased sharpness. This resulted in a general sense of ennui and apathy which continued beyond the VE and VJ day celebrations, which were themselves somewhat subdued. According to David Kynaston's citing of Mass Observation data in *A World To Build*, "riotous abandon was the exception rather than the rule" (9). Soon after, the Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated lend-lease program, designed to aid the allied nations during the war with loaned machinery from industrial to military, was cancelled:

The factories, which people hoped would soon be changing over to the production of goods for the shabby, short-of-everything home consumers are instead to produce goods for export. The Government will have to face up to the job of convincing the country that controls and hardships are as necessarily a part of a bankrupt peace as they were of a desperate war...People are suddenly realising that in the enormous economic blitz that has just begun, their problems may be as serious as the blitz they so recently scraped through (ibid 103).

Bread rationing only ended in 1947, clothes rationing and sweets rationing in 1949 - the public simply had to learn to cope with the results. The spectre of the atom bomb which had closed out the war was fresh in people's minds - a weapon which could cause hitherto inconceivable amounts of human and infrastructural destruction - was now a real part of world warfare (the "mushroom shaped cloud that lived perpetually in a cave at the back of his mind", as John Wain put it in *Hurry On Down* [22]).

Politically, it could be fair to say that Labour had won a post war majority from a population which sought a change from Conservative party domination; essentially, a fresh start. Barbara Castle - a newly elected Labour M.P at the time - stated that she detected amongst the people at her eve-of-poll meeting "a sort of unbelievable buoyancy" (ibid 68), a palpable sense of change on the horizon and an opportunity to positively shape the peace time environment.

Yet the motivations for voting Labour into power were not uniform. Some were tired of Churchill, finding him distinctly out of tune with public opinion. An example of this was his statement during a pre-election broadcast that, if the left gained power, they would institute a secret police to deal with dissent and "gather all the power to the supreme party and the party leaders" (ibid 65). Scaremongering and the fueling of paranoia were major goals, seemingly. Contrast this with Aneurin ('Nye') Bevan's rousing rhetoric, advocating for Britain a "new industrial revolution... (which) can only be done by men with modern minds, by men of a new age" (ibid 64). Other voters

for Labour were left leaning individuals – Iris Murdoch for one - whilst others were just keen to let "the other lot" have a go at government.

If the public opinion was divided, then so was that of the party, and the left as a whole was not uniform in its ideology and motivation. At a Fabian Society conference in late 1945, a massive array of differing viewpoints on the future of socialism were discussed. John Bowlby, an eminent psychiatrist, argued that the British working classes had an intense desire for consumer goods, and that social scientific methods should aim to identify and manage these emotions (in this, Bowlby was eerily prescient of New Labour). R.H Tawney - the Christian socialist much admired by Raymond Williams – felt that common people had resources of initiative and ability that weren't being put to proper use. Tawney thus believed in the active, positive potentiality of the working classes. G.D.H Cole saw a future where a large proportion of society would participate in leadership at some level, disliking the implication that there was a massive divide between the capabilities/potential of the educated compared with the uneducated. Contrastingly, Evan Durbin, a Labour politician and future source of inspiration for more centre-left Labour politicians like Anthony Crosland, believed that people are more wicked than earlier thought, and selective breeding was “probably the answer” (*A World To Build* 130). A rigorously planned economy, a tenet of much socialist thinking, was forsaken for practical concerns. The City would not have it, it was contrary to the free market, and the Chancellor Hugh Dalton was not dedicated enough (c.f the “half-cock nationalisation of the Bank Of

England in 1946" [ibid 139]). Essentially, in terms of politics, economics and philosophy, there were many different forces in interaction.

The post war gender structure was in an altered state compared to before also. Women who had been part of the workforce during the war years were now expected to revert to more subservient roles. Previously women had been performing "man's work"; some did not mind the reverting to type, others did. Patriarchal authority re-exerted itself, coupled with an element of post war depression suffered by the returning males. Soldiers were, understandably, sometimes scarred by their experiences, and would in some cases express this through new found distance and alienation from their families. One child of a returning soldier reminisced that "I did not like this tall, weird, cold man...he had become mentally imbalanced by his incarceration" (97). Egalitarian impulses (albeit somewhat of a virtue out of necessity), reflected in the full-time employment of women during the war, did not seemingly extend to matters of contraception in the post war period:

Birth control was too politically contentious to mention when the National Health Service itself was still a matter for delicate negotiation. The Family Planning Association, though in principle committed to state birth control services, failed to press for contraception under the NHS (Hall 128).

Interesting, abortion was legislated for in some contexts, however, pointing to an acknowledgment by the Labour government at the time of the need to safeguard the physical and mental well-being of pregnant women:

Abortion continued marginalized and criminalized, although the Bergman-Ferguson case of 1948 clarified existing case law, when the judge ruled that abortion was legal if the doctor believed in good faith that continuing pregnancy would be seriously deleterious to a woman's physical or mental health ['irrefutable evidence' was not necessary] (ibid).

The decline in imperial strength - in terms of the advent of Indian liberty, as well as conflicts in China (the Yangtze mission to save Commonwealth subjects from Mao's Red Army) - dented national pride. The older belief in Britannia ruling the waves was adjusting itself to new and different rules and burgeoning post colonialism. In an imperial sense, the United States of America was firmly in the ascendancy, militarily as well as economically. The aforementioned canceling of the lend-lease program put Britain in an awkward position, making the country hugely in debt to the United States, having to pay back the cost of industrial and military equipment which they had received, as well as other goods, as part of a newly negotiated loan (so massive that it was only paid off at the end of 2006). Also, the devaluation of the pound (in 1949, it was devalued against the dollar by 30%) and the earlier problem of inconvertibility, meaning the pound was not allowed to be exchanged on the currency market, was not a morale boosting occurrence.

Yet at the same time, certain undoubtedly positive things were occurring, and in ways Britain was moving towards a more egalitarian view of society as a whole. In 1948, the NHS was created (two years after Aneurin Bevan's National Health act), offering free health care for all, regardless of means. The private medical insurance

company BUPA was also established in 1947, illustrating that a back up to the state system was still important. Industries like rail (January 1948), gas (beginning in July 1948, ending in May 1949), coal (January 1947) as well as the aforesaid Bank Of England (February 1946) were nationalised with the aim of socially responsible planning of infrastructure and natural resources. The BBC Light programme, the precursor of BBC Radio 1 and 2, was created in 1945, broadcasting more entertainment which would appeal to a popular audience, and to distract the majority from the hardships being experienced. The Third Programme was established in 1946, appealing to a different audience, and tied in with a F.R. Leavis style experiment in attempting to increase cultural mobility amongst its listeners. The role of Charles Haley, the 5th director-general of the BBC - after Reith, Ogilvie, Graves and Foot (the latter three being in quick succession) - in formulating the concept of Radio 3/The Third Programme is crucial; "let it often become dull. Let it make mistakes" (quoted in Carpenter, 8). Haley was an autodidact who had not been to university, but this fact had enhanced his enjoyment and reverence of intellectual pursuits (ibid 7). Haley is quoted as saying that he envisaged the restructured BBC - the Light Programme (essentially modern day Radio 1/2), the Home Service (Radio 4) and the Third Programme (Radio 3) - as being akin to a pyramid, reflecting broad class based tastes. The Light Programme, he felt, could play "the waltz from Der Rosenkavalier" (by Richard Strauss), the Home Service "the most tuneful act from the opera", and the Third "the whole work, from beginning to end, dialogue and all" (ibid 9).

This is interesting, and he considered the pyramid structure to be fluid - listeners could ascend the social ladder, as it were, by embracing the finest in art and literature. The division between the three stations in terms of Strauss allows for a neat delineation of taste vis á vis the educational backgrounds of the listeners in a manner that Pierre Bourdieu would have found intriguing; from a 'nice tune' as it were, to an act, to the whole thing, possibly complete with an introduction and conclusion in commentary. Although the remit initially pointed toward an audience "of taste, of intelligence, and of education" in its terms of reference from January 1946 (ibid 12), this was not to say that, following Haley's fluid conception of movement between stations, one could not potentially cross between these boundaries. In September of the same year, the station began broadcasting. Tribune praised the potential for "the network's contribution to the 'cultural and political life of the nation' ", whilst The Times "welcomed the culture but was worried by putting it in the ghetto of a separate network" (ibid 26).

Thus, grim economic conditions, imperial decline, national debt, gender conflict as well as familial breakdowns were all in the frame. Yet, concurrently, there were potential positives. The initiation of a socially conscious health service and social insurance, infrastructural development, the opening up of Cambridge university officially to women (Girton College, although set up in 1869, was not a constituent part of the university until 1947). Comprehensive education began, and thus academic as well as more practical, trade based education could be opened up to a wide amount of children in the same school, regardless of performance in an entrance exam. The first



of these, the Holyhead County School in Anglesea, was set up in 1949. Even the opening up of the nation's first supermarkets (January 1948 at the Co-Op in Manor Park and Sainsbury's in Croydon in July 1950) could have seemed like exciting, life improving events. Older forces collided with emerging ones, all products of a culture in flux.

The following quotation from a letter written by Philip Larkin to his college friend and fellow writer Kingsley Amis in September 1942 says something about his reserved belief in a romantic sensibility:

I don't know about you but I'm definitely a romantic in art, if that means anything. This means I expect colour, idealism and myticism, *to a certain extent* [my italics]. (*Selected Letters of Philip Larkin*, 44)

In Larkin's letters in general, there is a keen insight into the fluctuating environment of a certain side of post war Britain, as well as in his first two novels. Although Larkin is mainly revered for his poetic output (he published four poetry collections - *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974), along with other work written for journals, magazines etc), in some ways his more unsung writings can offer an equally rich insight into the artist. He also published two novels - *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl In Winter* (1947) - and, in many ways, his *Selected Letters* offer an excellent illustration of the view of societal development put forward in Raymond Williams' 1961 work *The Long Revolution*. In any society there are conflicting forces in interaction related to how beliefs interact with each other,

and the culture – a complex interplay of the idea of intellectual development or evolution of thought (progress), the body of works produced (texts) and the general behaviour patterns of people (practices) – is an interaction of these. Essentially, it is a “structure of feeling” (64), which encompasses the “arts of the period” (65) but which is also evident “in all actual communities” (65). Williams describes these as residual, dominant and emergent culture, which can be identified in any analysis of the historical facts of a given period and cultural text as being in interaction.

In looking at Larkin's letters - which span the period 1940-1985 - these elements are detectable in the text, in a rough sense, in the following aspects of his (sometimes very) informal, non-literary writing. A residual, conservative ideology could be seen in a dismissive, imperialistic attitude to foreign cultures – in a letter to fellow Movement author John Wain stating “I dread America for unknown germs, Puerto Rican stabbings etc” (*Selected Letters* 303). There is a conservative derision of the “masses”, writing to C.B Cox of the *Critical Quarterly* that, in the aftermath of the 1963 Robbins Report on university expansion, “I just want to see the universities closed down, except for Oxford and Cambridge. I think they have all been a terrible mistake” (*ibid* 453). This evokes a sense of dialectical opposition to the then dominant consensus of widening access to third level; “between the late 1960s and late 1980s the percentage of 18-19 year-olds entering higher education more than doubled, from around 6 percent to about 14 percent” (Royle 16). The emergent is suggested in Larkin's status as a newly educated middle class man, who “went up” from grammar school to Oxford, and an impulse toward, cynical subversion/rebellion through

writing (the blunt, stark realism of 'This Be The Verse', say). This is as well as the influence of American culture through jazz, which Larkin refers to with pride as "Those Awful Blaring Jazz Things" (*Selected Letters* 62).

As all these aspects interact, Larkin seems more part of an emergent force, though this is not to say that he does not possess some internalisation of the residual attitudes (an idea of respecting your betters), or standard right wing view of Britain's superiority over "Johnny Foreigner". Indeed, in general, there can be no ultimate affiliation of any one of these categories absolutely to a single group or artist or cultural texts. Rather, these aspects of culture interact and are in conflict with each other. For example, Larkin expresses a love of the jazz produced by Americans, analyses it and gives it a lot of significance (as does his friend Kingsley Amis). Whilst acknowledging that "England may be full of dishonesty and unpleasantness and sordidity etc.", he also feels a "fuck America" (67) sentiment, inspired undoubtedly by the country's rising imperial power during World War II in comparison to Britain's decline. He dislikes the élite, but actively derides regional universities and categorises them as imbecilic. John Kemp, the hero of his first novel *Jill* (1946), is a similarly "in between" character. He looks up to the moneyed, privileged contemporaries of his at Oxford (they are at least lively), and derides the more thickly accented, Northern English fellow scholarship boy (he is dour) who he has far more in common with. It is not an idealised portrayal of his former university – as Larkin wrote to Amis when writing the work, "there are no artists, or dons, or nice friendly girls, or comic scouts...everybody is very *young* and drinks a lot" (75). As Andrew Motion writes,

there is an artifice at work in his novels, where both texts are in a sense about the act of writing itself, and artistic dreams in general:

Is 'self the man' or is 'virtue social'? Should each individual obey 'your wants' or 'the world's for you'? These questions, posed throughout the remainder of Larkin's work, are evident in the novel which stands at the beginning of his career. They summarize the tensions upon which all his writing depend (158).

In *Jill* and *A Girl In Winter*, the protagonists' respective romantic notions got the better of them; in *Jill*, Kemp is crushed by the weight of his idealising of Gillian, leading him into a romance that is so unrealistic as to be bound to fail. There is nothing likable portrayed about this pursuit and - in Kemp's writing about and romanticising of Gillian - a painful and fantastical dislocation from reality is apparent. Thus, Larkin seems to suggest that the divorced world of writing can be painfully false, and potentially very destructive, as well as a barrier to self knowledge. Returning to his letters, Larkin's views on literature stand out and are outspoken (particularly his well-documented disdain for Dylan Thomas), but he is clearly a product of an academic system preoccupied with a Canon/Canonicity. In his letters, he settles into the role of a somewhat stately curmudgeon, a sympathetic critic of the divisive Margaret Thatcher (though not necessarily self identifying as a Tory), as well as of the state of the nation. In early 1982 he wrote to Amis, asking:

How do you think the Scargill/Thatcher bout will go? I'm inclined to bet on her: this isn't 1974 you know (or whenever it was), and I guess the 'workers' are pretty fed up with those lazy overpaid brutes, as Aub. Waugh calls

them...It'll be Conservatives & SDP against the Commies. Still, this country's down the drain. Soon be an off-shore gambling island supported by prostitution and exhibiting the Queen (662-663).

Larkin's acceptance of the role of the Labour off-shoot the SDP "against the Commies" underlines his non-partisan nature; the cynical last line, indeed, seems to echo the words of Johnny Rotten. Being generally a scathing critic of what he felt to be the smug Modernist and apparently inauthentic poetry of Ted Hughes, he described the dichotomy between his demeanour and the approach of the future Poet Laureate during a reading at Hull in 1975 thusly:

Ted Hughes was here last week, giving a reading – the first time since about 1962. He filled our hall and got a great reception. I was in the chair, providing a sophisticated, insincere, effete, and gold-watch-chained to his primitive forthright virile leather-jacketed *persona* (525).

His poetry also adopts a more vernacular style that is more uniquely his own; conversely, his early poetry is influenced by W.H Auden and W.B Yeats. He is clearly in concert with the idea of a "Great Tradition", similar to that of Frank Leavis. Leavis derided modernists such as James Joyce, but elevated and advocated the classic 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel as produced by George Eliot and Leo Tolstoy. His is a popular sensibility therefore, one which is not definitively political and one which goes against the grain in a somewhat Bohemian way. Yet he is a poet as well as an agoniser over details, and his intellectualising over literature, the novel and art in general sets him apart from the cynics later to be discussed – mainly the aforementioned Amis, and

John Wain. His seems a more consciously middle class, petit-bourgeois viewpoint, of gamely struggling up the ladder to succeed (in the realm of poetry as well as his chosen career of librarian) whilst trying to retain intellectual and (mainly) artistic aspirations.

Larkin expresses a love for the Romantic in art within his letters, but this seems to not really be articulated in his novels. Yet they blaze a trail for the cynic in general. His works contain elements of the cynic – sympathy for traditional forms/anti modernist expressions, anti material gain and is sympathetic to a certain Bohemian ideal. His humour – not so much in evidence in *Jill* or *A Girl In Winter* but to be seen in his letters – is sometimes sarcastic, ill tempered, highly ironic, foul mouthed and occasionally resembling Beckett in its dour levity. He mocks conventions and criticises the dominant culture of business aspirations. At the same time, as Blake Morrison in his seminal book *The Movement* states, Larkin (particularly in his poetry) is of a piece with his contemporaries, believing that “Romanticism had reached a new peak, and poetry a nadir, during the 1940s, when ‘neo-Romanticism’ was the vogue and Dylan Thomas widely admired” (155). Thus it can be said that, for Larkin, whilst the status of the art-work is still important, the mythology of the excessive and at times obscure or impenetrable artist-poet is something to be fought against. The reaction against such obscurity underlines Larkin's status and underlying appeal to a broad swathe of British poetry readers – according to editor Edward Lucie-Smith's introduction to a selection of his work in the anthology *British Poetry Since 1945*:

a subtle psychologist, an elegant but deliberately conventional technician, a man with an instinctive knowledge of the aspirations of a new and important class, an excellent critic of his own work, he made a position for himself which was never seriously challenged by the other poets of the fifties: Larkin is *the* characteristic voice of a whole generation. (127)

There is an interesting and raw passage from one of Larkin's more incandescent letters to Kingsley Amis, related to this:

I am getting to the stage when I HATE anybody who does anything UNUSUAL at ALL, whether its make a lot of MONEY or dress in silly CLOTHES or read books of foreign WORDS or know a lot about anything or play any musical INSTRUMENT (menstrual) or pretend that they believe, anything out of the ordinary, that requires, a lot of courage, or a lot of generosity, or a lot of self-cunt-roll, to believe it - BECAUSE THEY ARE USUALLY SUCH SODDING NASTY PEOPLE THAT I KNOW IT IS 1000-1 THAT THEY ARE SHOWING OFF. - *and they don't KNOW it but I know it.* (*Selected Letters* 119 – emphases in Thwaite's text)

This aspect is tricky for Larkin as he does not seem to be expressing much of a bohemian sensibility. His poetic awakening was a rejection of Romantic influenced verse like W.B Yeats and Auden in favour of an allegiance to Thomas Hardy's more detached, less flowery poetry. He obviously doesn't attempt to be a dandy, and certainly doesn't attach Biblical significance to any writer's collected works like Morrissey seems to in the case of Wilde. As stated, Larkin, along with some of his

Movement contemporaries, rejected the poetry of Dylan Thomas as being exemplary of excess emotion and verbosity. He does have more conservative taste, and although he does seem to criticise the affluent society as well as encroaching modernity, he does still play the game and maintains a “Toad“-like existence, to a certain extent, as a librarian. At the same time, the outsider Artist persona is embraced early on in ‘Reasons For Attendance’, from his collection *The Less Deceived*. Seeing a group of young people dancing and enjoying life, he states that his calling is a higher one: “that lifted, rough-tongued bell/(Art, if you like) whose individual sound/Insists I am too individual.” He is conflicted at the final verse, however, and is aware that he may have “misjudged himself. Or lied (80).” In almost Romantic style, the outsider role is emphasised in ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’, a 1955 poem referencing Larkin’s time as a librarian in Belfast: “Lonely In Ireland, since it was not home,/Strangeness made sense”, concluding in the final verse with “Living in England has no such excuse.. Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence” (104). The awareness of the nebulousness of his role expands into cynicism in ‘A Study Of Reading Habits’ (131), with its conclusion that escapism through literature is over-rated, and that “books are a load of crap“. Alongside this, however, there is somewhat of a lack of belief in the validity of this outsider’s status, and even in the subversive power of art. This is where the oft-repeated defeatist critique of his work comes in. Andrew Motion, talking about ‘Toads’, claims, in relation to Larkin’s poetic self-image: “transcendence was no good: he must accept that failure and success, misery and happiness, confinement and freedom could not be separated from each other” (237).



The acceptance of this is not particularly positive, though it does conclude in an attempt to reconcile an isolated narrator with its lot. In the work of other representatives of the cynic sensibility, transcendence comes through death in 'There Is A Light That Never Goes Out' by The Smiths, yet Larkin never seems to reach such release as depicted in Colin's defiance of the Borstal authorities in *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner* or even Jim Dixon's happy, getting-away-with-it ending in *Lucky Jim*. Style, even if it is in a sense the style of detachment, is important for Larkin. He is not for excessive emotion, veers into the Romantic at times in both his early and later work, but the choice of a sparseness of language and an everyday, comprehensible tone is equally as focused as Wilde's comedic vision was, in a different way. See the contrast between the two 'fucking kids' and the 'nowhere, nothing...endless' blue skies in 'High Windows' (165). Randall Stevenson refers to the Movement being categorised by some as a "new aestheticism", and you can see how this would work. This also has a lingering influence of the writing of recent times, as Stevenson points out "much of the work included in *The Forward Book Of Poetry* (1999)...was largely shaped around the characteristics (of the Movement) [173]" and, by extension, Larkin as its most notable exponent. It is a unique style and, like the work of The Smiths and indeed Lennon/The Beatles, left indelible imprints on most of what came after it in its idiom. Interestingly, Larkin self-defined as "the Ringo Starr of contemporary verse" (*Letters To Monica* 326) in a 1964 letter to Monica Jones, drawing an unlikely connection between himself and the seemingly madcap, carefree (yet, compared to Lennon and McCartney, unglamorous) Beatles drummer – the

“ultimate Beatle fan” (Christgau 231). Unlike other aspects of contemporary popular culture, Larkin *was* seemingly aware of the significance, evidenced also the opening stanza of his poem 'Annus Mirabilis'. In a short letter to C.B Cox he confessed that:

I don't think I have ever read a copy of *Private Eye*, seen a performance of *Beyond the Fringe*, *That Was The Week That Was*, or whatever David Frost does. I have registered the Beatles and the mini-skirt, but that's about all... (426).

There are hardly any references to politics in his poetry, and Larkin doesn't have a youthful engagement with left-wing politics like Amis or Osborne. A poem from *High Windows*, 'Homage To A Government' (written in 1969), seems to be a significant, however. It describes: “Next year we are to bring the soldiers home/For lack of money, and it is all right.” Using repetition and a deadpan tone throughout to underline pathos, he concludes with a somewhat over-the-top couplet, “our children will not know it's a different country./All we can hope to leave them now is money. (171)” A lament for a Britain in the process of decolonisation (in this case, from Aden in modern day Yemen - see Sandbrook, *White Heat*, 374-377), it is quite reactionary, being elegiac in the same tone that Jimmy's father-in-law possesses in *Look Back In Anger*. He comes across as an anachronism, and the semi-popular characterisation of Larkin as a right-wing, bigoted little Englander dovetails nicely with this work (and, to a lesser extent, the poem '1914' too). His statement in *All What Jazz* that “jazz slackened when the Negro stopped wanting to entertain the white man” (24) is certainly offensive, whilst this is not to mention the use of racist language in some of

his collected letters and his criticism of “foreign” cultures, somewhat transgressive art etc. The poem certainly does strike a note of reverence for the residual idea of national definition through imperial strength, after U.K governments continued the process of decolonisation throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1980s, he was a supporter of Thatcher, though never publicly proselytising; some would say he appeals to an essential “Englishness” (*Society and Literature*, 203).

Yet to brand Larkin’s work as right-wing, just as to brand Morrissey’s lyrics in the 1980s as leftist, would be a simplification. It seems to assume that a didactic stream of nationalist invective permeates his work, to be closely read into over every page. Critics like Al Alvarez commented that “the idea that life in England goes on much as it always has” (quoted by Stevenson, 190) is a key, negative characteristic of his poems, couched in inertia and gentility. But this ignores the tensions in his work. Not all of his poetry is like “Homage To A Government”. Much of his work is critical of the drudgery of modern capitalist society, and without advocating an alternative, is still palpable. Work is a curse in ‘Toads’, and the attendant pursuit of wealth tragic and pointless (89-90), but inescapable and worthy of persevering with. The role of Anglicanism is questioned in ‘Church Going’ (97-98). Conventional love is skewered in ‘Self’s The Man’, resolutely denying idealistic ideas love by portraying a man and woman getting married as a selfish cop-out, with the bachelor Larkin somehow above it by refusing to compromise his independence and isolation for it (117-118). There is a certain unmitigated sensitiveness that allows itself expression in both Larkin’s poems and letter writing, mainly the former. He questions the meaning of life, the tensions

between the artist's life/an ascetic viewpoint and a belief in human interaction and happiness. The following quotation from a letter to J.B Sutton seems to suggest this Romantic sympathy – the reading of a sensitive letter, the perception of the physical pleasures of life and the grand image of the “sun flooding the earth”. It could be said to be a kind of manifesto for the cynic – the heroism and power inherent in normal, sometimes banal settings. Jimmy Porter, from Osborne’s *Look Back In Anger*, is a “French revolutionary” trapped in a mid 1950s sitting room:

And I said, by God, yes, this is the life I must write about, if I am spared by atomic buggers. No filthy thoughts or symbols or construction, just a man eating a tomato and a bit of cheese and reading a sensitive letter with the sun flooding the earth and feeling bloody fine.” (*Selected Letters Of Philip Larkin*, 110)

A Romantic sensibility towards the power of art, and Larkin’s identification of the importance of non-literary forms, can also be found in a rather simple and straightforward opening gambit in the introduction to his own collected jazz writings: “few things have given me more pleasure in life than listening to jazz”. Partly because of its connection with a certain select group of fellow jazz fans amongst his peers, and partly because of the specialist nature of jazz fandom, “no one you knew liked it” (*All What Jazz*, 15). His tastes are certainly not the jazz of the bebop or after era, however. Historian and sometime jazz critic Eric Hobsbawm mocked this in his own book on jazz, remarking that in the mid 1950s “both musicians and serious jazz-buffs were abandoning the pointless battles between Rampart Street and 52nd Street: all except

the comic novelist Kingsley Amis and the poet Philip Larkin, who continued to see bebop as treason" (*The Jazz Scene*, xix). As well as this idealism, in his writings on jazz, Larkin is pretty straight-up about his feelings about modernism generally. Perhaps his best definition on the errors inherent within it is contained, again, in the introduction *All What Jazz*. Whilst he claims to aspire to a degree of professional, critical detachment, and is somewhat equivocal in the reviews themselves, in this context he lets his true, more corrosive feelings be known:

All I am saying is that the term 'modern', when applied to art, has a more than chronological meaning: it denotes a quality of irresponsibility peculiar to this century, known sometimes as modernism, and once I had classified modern jazz under this heading I knew where I was. I am sure there are books in which the genesis of modernism is set out in full. My own theory is that it is related to an imbalance between the two tensions from which art springs: these are the tension between the artist and his material, and between the artist and his audience, and that in the last seventy-five years or so the second of these has slackened or even perished. In consequence the artist has become over-concerned with his material (hence an age of technical experiment), and, in isolation, has busied himself with the two principal themes of modernism, mystification and outrage. Piqued at being neglected, he has painted portraits with both eyes on the same side of the nose, or smothered a model with paint and rolled her over a blank canvas. He has designed a dwelling-house to be built underground. He has written poems resembling the kind of pictures

typists make with their machines during the coffee break, or a novel in gibberish, or a play in which the characters sit in dustbins. (23)

His coupling together of jazz with other forms of art (with cynical references to Samuel Beckett, concrete poetry and modernist architecture abound) is intriguing, placing them (negatively, in this instance) on the same level. John Coltrane receives specific derision, with Larkin memorably describing the more experimental end of his saxophone playing as akin to someone “screeching at you like a pair of demonically possessed bagpipes” (21). His non-academic definition of modernism is worth reiterating, embodying an erosion of the tension between artist and audience; thus ignored, artistic expression becomes an unprecedented excess of the aforementioned mystification and outrage. As an aside, it is worth pointing out here that - even in his admittedly partisan jazz reviews - he criticises John Coltrane strongly and consistently, but is far more generous to someone like Charlie Mingus (“every Mingus record is a tremendously exciting experience” [118]).

What is common to Larkin’s opinions on verse and music is a tendency to favour economy and clarity, “like the brilliant three-minute cameos in the age of 78s” (22). He reveres the tightly written music of the likes of Bix Beiderbecke, Fats Waller and Sidney Bechet as being worthy being categorised as jazz (all of whom were in their heyday in the pre World War II period), in contrast to their modernist successors. When writing about his connection with this music, he displays more of a sentimental, passionate sentiment, in contrast to a characteristically Movement-like sense of reserve. His early poem ‘The Ugly Sister’ (*Collected Poems*, 292), though not as

quintessentially *his* as later work (it owes a definite debt to W.B Yeats), is like a 1940s evocation of the “songs that saved your life” line of Morrissey’s, combined with a resolution of the creative sensibility:

I will climb thirty steps to my room,  
Lie on my bed;  
Let the music, the violin, cornet and drum  
Drowse from my head.

Since I was not bewitched in adolescence  
And brought to love,  
I will attend to the trees and their gracious silence,  
To winds that move.

In ‘For Sidney Bechet’ from *The Whitsun Weddings* (83), Larkin eulogises one of his favourite musicians in unequivocal terms: “on me your voice falls as they say love should,/Like an enormous yes.” It is the “natural noise of good”, and he certainly doesn’t ruminate too much on this - it comes across as more personal, less clean, and certainly more celebratory than many Larkin lyrics. And ‘Reference Back’ gives a glimpse of the unity which music can bring between generations, a comment of his mother’s about a record he plays creates a “sudden bridge/From your unsatisfactory age/To my unsatisfactory prime” (106), before drawing a pessimistic conclusion about how this moment will always be marked out in future as a reminder of

limitations. If anything approaching transcendence is available to the poet, it seems to be via a love of popular music.

## **Conclusion**

Philip Larkin, after the Compton Fellowship at the University Of Hull was discontinued in 1975, stated that:

In universities both music and poetry tend to be thought of in terms of the departments that teach them... This seems to me quite wrong. Both are forms of art, and art is universal, not simply a subject to be taught... (quoted in Motion, 381).

This sense of idealism about the potential impact and importance of artistic forms is a far cry from the more stubborn reactionary impulse against the perceived excesses of neo-Romanticism; it seems, to find the more idealistic elements of Larkin, one needs to see the treatment of music within his writings. As well as pointing to a quasi-Romantic/Bohemian conception of art, it also highlights a cross-cultural element in his outlook - defining modernism within jazz as well as literature, but also recognising the power of the “brilliant three-minute cameos” to deeply effect people’s lives. There is an echo of what Gilbert Phelps identifies as the key of characteristic of his strongest work here: “in his best poems (there is) a valid means of preserving a core of genuineness in the midst of what he sees as the surrounding cultural and social anarchy” (*Modern Britain - The Cambridge Cultural History*, 214). In opposition to the



anarchic impulses of free-form modernist explorations, a more reined in approach suggests a sense of authenticity, and “realness”. There are similar bohemian tendencies, as well as the crossing over of cultural boundaries, in the early 1950s fictional works of John Wain (*Hurry On Down*), Kingsley Amis (*Lucky Jim*) and Iris Murdoch (*Under The Net*). It is these works that I wish to analyse next, around which the cynic sensibility becomes somewhat more refined, but is not yet in its most definitive form.

## Chapter 2 – *Work Is A Curse*

The 1930s were an era of economic deprivation coupled with a burgeoning awareness of class conflict in Britain. Narratives such as the fictional *Love On The Dole* by Walter Greenwood or the non-fictional *The Road To Wigan Pier* by George Orwell underlined the plight of many ordinary British people who were neither members of the capital owning or industrial class, or the professional, better educated, comfortable middle class. Unemployment is pathologised in Greenwood's novel: "it got you slowly, with the slippered stealth of an unsuspected, malignant disease." (169) And key to Orwell's narrative is the pathetically poor living conditions of ordinary working people (for instance, the coal-miners, "blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust" [31]) and the unemployed alike. During this period, social organisations also rose - a National Union Of Unemployed Workers, serving the interests of a then vast interest group, sought to increase solidarity and collective action in the face of "the deadening, debilitating effect of unemployment" (Orwell, 73). Extreme hardship and institutional carelessness were par for the course - the dole was low, and rules preventing working illegally to earn extra money were rigorously enforced - thereby inflating the disparity between "The Establishment" as such and ordinary people. Despite the war effort and its related boost in popular cultural nationalist rhetoric ('keep calm and carry on'/we're all in this together'), an emergent

strand of political culture sought to ameliorate these aforesaid conditions within the mainstream. Thus 1944's *The Beveridge Report* (a 600,000 copy bestseller - see Peter Clarke's *Hope and Glory, Britain 1900-1990*, 214), which recommended a system of universal social insurance, welfare and a non means tested National Health Service pointed the way to a different sort of politics, where the consensus became more to do with the state seeing to the needs of all of its citizens, as opposed to seeing the poor as inherently "undeserving". This seemed to be well on its way before the 1940s - Orwell identified a growing awareness of the damages of poverty amongst the middle classes in the mid 1930s. But alongside this awareness there was a sense that the British people as a whole needed to become more broadly egalitarian after the "collective war effort", and that the creation of a "New Jerusalem" would have to at least be attempted.

Aspects of documentary film-making and politics made by the likes of John Grierson and others in the 1930s foreshadowed a sense of moving forward into a more progressive, socially aware era. They presented poverty in the reality of the labour exchange, and the grime of the coal mining town, but also the importance of idealistic thinking. Filmed texts presented the building of social housing, and collective action with co-operatives, for instance, as examples of collective action in society combating rampant capitalist excess. It must be said, as an aside, that the form of said texts is charmingly quaint - subjects are clearly delivering scripted or rehearsed lines often, and the narrative is rarely direct in critiquing class - yet they

still point towards an emergent culture which continues in the post World War Two period. As Aitken has written on the form:

The conservative hegemony (of the 1930s) was not absolute, however, and from 1931 to 1939 various strands of opinion gradually converged to form a social democratic consensus which eventually achieved political ascendancy in 1945. It is this strand of political and cultural discourse, described by one of its Conservative proponents, Harold Macmillan, as 'the middle way' between unfettered capitalism and a nationalising socialism, with which the documentary film movement, and Grierson in particular, must be associated...The Documentary movement is best understood, then, as social democratic and reformist in relation to the dominant conservatism of the inter-war period, but not as occupying any explicitly socialist position (61).

This growing consensus and the tensions between older and emergent cultural formations is to the fore within the cynic sensibility, as shown in the novels analysed in this chapter.

The sense of the importance of reconstruction carries over into the Arts, and into official governmental bodies devoted to their propagation. The brainchild of John Maynard Keynes, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (or CEMA) was conceived as a state body to subsidise, boost (/multiply, in a pseudo economic theory fashion) and encourage the production of art throughout Britain, and was the forerunner of the Arts Council. Underlying this was a sense that adverse material

conditions should not be allowed to adversely affect the production of interesting artworks, the argument running that the vagaries of the market could exclude many talented individuals, and that periods of economic bust in the past had perhaps inhibited the capability of artists to realise their potential. Of course this was still bound up in class rigidity - CEMA's ugly sister, the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA), existed to show that high culture still had a leg up over mere "entertainment" (art must not be entertaining?) - but again this was a step forward. Artists would not have to alter their art according to a private (or, indeed, commercial/business) interest, although this absolute opposition in a capitalist society based on the trade of commodities was to become ever more apparent in its contradictory nature as years went on. Yet this state intervention hinted at a funding for the arts apart from the vagaries of patronage, and implied a support of ventures which were not *necessarily* non-commercial, but perhaps would not have been possible out of a comparatively poor class background. In this context during the war, "cultural inclusiveness was not simply a propaganda fiction" - crossovers in this context between traditional high and low forms were prevalent (Nicholas 130).

Indeed, although potentially a vehicle by which a more educated and cosmopolitan highly cultured elite could become patronised by the state, the Arts Council presented the possibility that a poorer artist may be able to carve out a career despite an underprivileged background. By this levelling of the playing field to a certain extent, the idea of a state supportive of a general sort of upward mobility seemed to have currency. In this more "modern"/modernised Britain, more people became open to

the concept, if not necessarily the reality, of class-transcending upward movement. Another aspect of this, although again perhaps catering to the converted (to twist a cliché) was BBC's the Third Programme (as referenced in the previous chapter), the forerunner of the present day Radio 3. Key to the conception of this station - created in tandem with the Light Programme (popular songs and comedy) and the Home Service (more sophisticated music and talk) - was that listeners would be exposed to a free radio station comprised of theatre, classical music, political and philosophical discussion etc and thus be enlightened into being more culturally knowledgeable beings; a higher class of listener. We will see later that in the picaresque narratives of John Wain's *Hurry On Down* and Iris Murdoch's *Under The Net*, there is a similar sense of fluidity, albeit with more fluctuations: Wain's hero works many jobs and ultimately goes to London to become a comedy writer, whilst Murdoch's protagonist Jake Donohue has an epiphany about the beauty of life whilst seeing a new born kitten at the novel's close. Related to this is an idea of hypergamy or "marrying up" coupling between Jim Dixon and Christine Callaghan, apparent in the conclusion of Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*.

In the early 1950s, a Britain still in recovery from bomb damage and the post war period was not liable to revel in material prosperity. True, the "never had it so good" MacMillan era was not too far away, but it had not hit just yet, and even taking this consumer boom into account did not discount the appeal of bohemian squalor. "Work is a curse" states the literary translator and author hero Jake Donaghue in *Under The Net*, and this is an attitude shared by Jim Dixon in *Lucky Jim* and Charles Lumley in

*Hurry On Down* as well. They renounce the pursuit of material gain (each to a point), but acknowledge the necessity of some kind of graft/earning power. They are all educated and “class conscious”, but do not hang about with social climbers in their leisure, or adorn their homes with the trappings of wealth.

Peter Sloterdijk describes various kinds of laughter which can have a subversive effect in his *Critique Of Cynical Reason*. The first version he looks at is the “sticking the tongue out” at the world – this, he states, “says no with many undertones: there can be aggression in it, obstinacy, or mockery, and it tells the addressee that we consider him or her an idiot or a bore” (142). This kind of humour is crucial to both the cynic sensibility's popular appeal as well as its relation to the bohemian attitude. Following on from this, of the novels to be discussed, Amis's 1954 novel *Lucky Jim* is definitely the funniest. This mocking satirical and realistic novel about post War academia centres around the titular Jim Dixon. Dixon is an opportunistic lecturer who took all the “easy options” in undergrad, qualifying him amply in medieval history, not realising that this would limit his teaching options to just that subject area. There are other ridiculous character types in the novel – the over eager and diligent mature student Michie (seen rather harshly through the perceptions of Dixon), the absent minded professor and Dixon's boss Welch and the pseudo love interest of Margaret, a bookish, insecure academic contemporary of the hero, apparently modelled on Larkin's long-term companion Monica Jones. She is full of “avowals” as opposed to vows, and the object of Dixon's drunken romantic fumbblings. She is revealed to be quite underhand though, letting slip a certain neurotic obsessiveness on her part

when it becomes known that she faked a suicide attempt (by placing an empty bottle of sleeping pills beside her bed, before taking a normal, non fatal dose) in order to garner sympathy and male attention. The pseudo preceding the love interest part is crucial here – Dixon initially does not take the whole business seriously, and when it doesn't work out for him he doesn't seem to care that much.

Likewise, he mocks his boss inwardly pretty consistently. Dixon is always sticking his tongue out at Professor Welch. Yet the portrayal of academia is somewhat more affectionate here than in *Hurry On Down*; the campus novel is not a rant against the institution itself. There is a certain affection inherent in Jim's interaction with the academic world – he does not seem to truly hate it, and there is not any suggestion of vileness. But underneath this is a strong hallmark of the cynic – a derision for playing the game. In terms of the Bohemianism, however, Amis is not a fan – representing this idea in his novel is only Bertrand Welch, the “artist” son of Dixon's boss Professor Welch. He lays claim to the a life on the fringes of society yet actively seeks patronage, and claims to believe in the power of art and its classical relevance to Culture (intentional capitalisation), yet is a supporter of the inert and the Establishment . Kowtowing to rich patrons, expressing support for laissez-faire conservatism (small c) in the face of more egalitarian social policies by Labour, and inclined to make incredibly arrogant remarks about the working class, Bertrand is not sympathetic. He is also quick tempered and a crass womanizer, described by the character of Carol sarcastically as “the great painter...great artists always have a lot of women, so if he can have a lot of women that makes him a great artist, never mind what his pictures



are like" (120-121). In this respect, the disdain for a character like Bertrand is similar to the Movement writers' hitherto stated rejection of the mythology around Dylan Thomas, or more specifically, the "Thomas legend...Thomas as drunk, fornicator, rebel" (Morrison,146) - except, in the case of Bertrand's, his work is never referred to in any positive sense. The cultural capital or cachet assigned to being an artist is parodied; Dixon, at times, had "wished he wrote poetry or something as a claim to developed character" (Amis 140) - Bertrand, ironically, seems far from it.

The argument Dixon engages him in is based on the very simple point-of-view he holds that wealth redistribution is a good thing, simply because of its fairness for the majority. Responding to Bertrand's complaint that the rich are being oppressed by high taxation, Dixon states, "if one man's got ten buns and another's got two, and a bun has got to be given up by one of them, then surely you take it from the man with ten buns" (ibid 51). There is no all-encompassing ideology being articulated here, and he is not supporting socialism as such. Yet it is a point of view which attaches itself to a common sense belief in the rightness of supporting your fellow man, a brotherhood of sorts perhaps, allied to a compassionate sense of wealth redistribution. Bertrand's response that he is proud of being a contrary and unfashionable individual in supporting the rich ("And shall I tell you what else I happen to like? Rich people. I take pride in the contemporary unpopularity of that statement." [52]). Their right to hoard their wealth is to him seemingly inalienable, making him unsympathetic and perhaps derisory in the context of the burgeoning post-war Keynesian consensus. Dixon retaliates, as only the voice of a new generation can, that "you'd better make the most

of them while you've got them, then, because you won't have them much longer, you know" (52). All the same, *Lucky Jim* as a novel does not resemble a dedicated political statement by any means. There is an interesting treatment of an idiosyncratic class politics later in the novel, however. In conversation with Christine - who ultimately leaves for London with Dixon at the novel's close - Dixon, in response to a question over whether she should marry Bertrand or not, he, unsurprisingly, says "no". More intriguingly, when asked to explain his reasoning, he states:

'Because I like you and I don't like him.'

'Is that all?'

'It's quite enough. It means each of you belongs to the two great classes of mankind, people I like and people I don't.' (143)

Thus, questions of class, though possibly at some level always present in British dialogue, are transformed from a ruling/subordinate dichotomy, or a tripartite upper/middle/lower structure, into people Dixon likes, and people Dixon doesn't like. This highly personal and fluctuating sense of class politics - stated, admittedly, in a slightly flippant, witty way appropriate to the comic tone of the novel - removes ideas of social background and history to a conception of class, and places the emphasis on people who are simply likeable and not likeable. Though Stevenson's criticism of the Movement-era novels' values as being "shallow or covertly conservative" and "unadventurous in style" (*A Reader's Guide To The Twentieth Century Novel In Britain* 95) holds true, as I've suggested this can be held to be effectively more ambiguous.

However, in relation to Amis's own later transition into an advocate of Thatcherite conservatism in the late 1970s, this kind of statement seems prescient of his later political views - if judgements are to be made on amiability alone, devoid of the intimate structured connections inherent in a traditional class community, then there is truly no such thing as society. Dixon, however, does transgress against his position in society by resolutely refusing to play the game or climb what Raymond Williams refers to in *Culture And Society* as "the ladder", thus qualifying himself as a mild bohemian. He will not conform to what the dominant class wishes of him, and he relentlessly mocks pretension. Yet at the close he absconds to London to work in business for Gore-Urquhart as well as eloping with a woman of a higher social class than his (the tendency for this to be the case in *Movement/Angry Young Men* writing - and its transference into film adaptations of the same - is referred to in John Hill's work on 1950s-1960s British cinema). An ambivalent relationship towards the myth of the Bohemian is key to both; Dixon wishes to rebel to a certain point, but is not adverse to becoming some part of "the system" if luck or chance will allow it - here again, there is no strong sense of a class attachment or roots holding him back.

Whilst the treatment of academia is cynical and mocking (though not altogether scathing) in *Lucky Jim*, the elements of academic life shown in John Wain's *Hurry On Down* are far more offensive. The only students in Wain's novel, or remnants of the hero Charles Lumley's time in Oxford, are essentially toffs, lead by an ex-prefect and rugby player named Burge. Signifying both class bound inherited privilege as well as professional status and wealth, their clique strong arm Lumley out of a party and

throw him down a flight of stairs after he makes some drunken, acerbic remarks.

Unable to accept Burge's derision of an eccentric, non-conformist named Reilly, he challenges him. However, their exchange rapidly and drunkenly degenerates into a debate over the ethics of Lumley's lack of career ambition given his background.

Burge blurts: "you ought to have taken on some decent job, the sort of thing you were brought up and educated to do, and leave this bloody slop-emptying to people who were brought up and educated for slop-emptying." (165) This insensitivity and snobbery of Burge and other "successful" school-age contemporaries of Lumley contrasts with the identification of the hero with the eccentric or outsider, as well as his dropping out of societal competition. Even though Lumley is often portrayed as more of an aimless character by Wain, it suggests, again, a sympathy for those who do not merely conform to the strictures imposed by the class they were born into.

Wain's hero seems to wilfully oppose what his opportunities and education have given him in his life. Rather than become, in some sense, upwardly mobile, Lumley, in a sort of foreshadowing of what came to be known as "slacker" culture in 1990s America, plots his course through a succession of often responsibility and skill-free jobs, seemingly liberated from the onus on self-betterment and the idea of "success". Whilst his work as a driver for a shady gangster has an element of excitement and intrigue to it, Lumley approaches it quite matter-of-factly and without much of a sense of the thrill of illicit behaviour. Indeed, it is almost as if Wain inserted this element into the plot in order to make the story seem more intrinsically exciting. Of course, fate intervenes and Lumley ultimately gets the chance to become a comedy writer in

London at the novel's close; the impact of this resolution dullens the novel's power, I feel, and points to the inadequacy of conventional realism to deal with uncertainty and open-endedness.

The position of Britain in flux within the context of a post-WWII landscape is dealt with by Steven Connor early on in his work on *The English Novel In History*. Connor references Michel Foucault's idea of mankind's mission to create a "historical subject" (from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* - i.e. "the nation", "the working class", "culture/Culture") and ties it in to how British society has become de-anchored from such a fixed position. Britain came progressively towards losing its confident belief that it was the subject of its own history. This eviction from historical self-possession came about in two ways. An increasingly hostile 'outside' pressed in upon Englishness, in the ever more aggressive relations of military superpowers and the ever more rampant and uncontrollable dynamisms of a capitalism organised in multinational forms not subject to the control of sovereign states. And then, with the multiplication of alternative forms of belonging and self-definition, the very idea of what Englishness meant also began to come apart on the inside (3). Essentially he is relating the idea of Englishness as a fragmented narrative to historical processes of a shift in the global balance of economic and political power, and an opening up of the nation to concepts of multi-culturalism in a pluralist society. Although the subject of different international cultures impinging on British society is not dealt with in these early 1950s novels, certainly the sense of American influence is apparent, as well as the

attendant changes being wrought by a new political consensus, different class identities, and the emerging inevitability of the dismantling of Empire/decolonisation.

Subject to influences from international (modernist) influences from without and another key character in Wain's depiction of the collegiate bohemian ideal is the former classmate of Lumley's at Oxford and aspirant author, Edwin Froulish. Froulish is mocked by the narrator, is somewhat absurdly obscure and daft and thus is certainly intended to be the butt of humour. As Wain writes, "his whole life was lived in the pages of that monumental biography which was to be written, after his death, by some short-sighed silverhaired professor (33)." Froulish seems to also guilty of the excesses identified by Amis in his poem 'Against Romanticism' (1962). The first stanza characterises the tortured poet's outlook as a trip into the wilderness, a "temperate zone",

To please an ingrown taste for anarchy  
 Torrid images circle in the wood,  
 And sweat for recognition up the road,  
 Cramming close the air with their bookish cries (37).

Seeking to embrace a sense of anarchy (albeit "ingrown"), the Romantic instead produces a cramped, cloying effect, complete with "bookish cries", where "torrid images circle". The second stanza invites a contrasting approach:

Better, of course, if images were plain,  
 Warnings clearly said, shapes put down quite still

Within the fingers' reach, or else nowhere;

But complexities crowd the simplest thing,

And flaw the surface that they cannot break.

Let us make at least visions that we need (ibid).

Thus, far from romanticising experience and emphasising tendencies towards mystification, unadorned simplicity is key; as Amis concludes, “woods devoid of beasts, roads that please the foot.” This is the appeal of the Movement's writing in general, where, as Gary Day identifies, “the achievement of the Movement was to confer a sense of cultural worth on the ordinary things of life (13).”

Yet there is a definite sympathy with Froulish's character, especially when he is posited against George Hutchins, an odious social climber (he was after “the raw cult of success” [8]) who roomed with Lumley but sought to utterly cast aside his roots and adopt the mannerisms and behaviour of academic “complacent prigdom” (7). Romanticism may be something to go against, yet Hutchins's coy pursuit of cultural capital is far worse. When these two contrasting figures come face to face at a reading by Froulish at the Stotwell literary society, Wain's sympathy comes more directly into view. Hutchins gratuitously name-drops Franz Kafka in conversation, and when asking questions of Froulish's bizarre postmodernist piece of writing he passingly references Western classical music. Hutchins in his questioning has the “calm condescending air of a man accustomed to examining ideas and putting them in order” (61), whereas Froulish in his responses is more relexive, aware and mocking of

the whole enterprise – he is not as po-faced as he appears initially in the text. All the while, the character of the school master Gunner-Forbes interjects with remarks about the superiority of Thackeray, and, equally as smugly as Hutchins, seeks to denigrate Froulish's work. Their predictable responses, heightened as the whole scene is for comic effect (again, humour is key), suggests at the banality and even drudgery of their bourgeois existence, and the novel is perfectly placed to see this. Worst of all, they appear to take the Stotwell literary society seriously! The artist is certainly the hero of this scene; clichéd though his schtick may be, we sympathise with him as he, like Lumley, represents not only a break from the norm, but a certain belief in what goes beyond *only* the everyday.

Certainly when it comes to the romantic aspect, Froulish's "liasion" (not "relationship") with Betty is sardonically described as conforming to "the traditions of the 'Bohemian' artistic life, as lived in the Latin quarter of English industrial cities" (43), mocking their seeming aspirations to ape Parisian (or equivalent cosmopolitan) life. Stotwell's underlines the absurdity of Wain's juxtaposition of both places. Indeed, the ménage à trois and dishevelled living quarters - bar the neatly and meticulously organised writing table - are clichéd. However, Lumley's recurrent aspirations in *Hurry On Down* to escape the strictures of his middle-class upbringing are strong, and – unlike Winston in *1984* – he avowedly rejects hope amongst the proletarian classes:

He must form no roots in his new stratum of society, but remain independent of class, forming roots only with impersonal things such as places or seasons, or, in the other end of the scale, genuinely personal attachments that could be



gently prized loose from all considerations involving more than two people (38).

The 'New Jerusalem' of the post-war social democratic settlement, perhaps oddly, produces in Lumley the desire to embrace atomisation and rootlessness. However, the hero's initial fumbblings and lack of success in this endeavour leads him to a realisation that:

He, who had rejected and been rejected by both the class of his origin and the life of the 'worker', might find the classless setting of his dreams in sharing a roof with a neurotic sham artist and a trousered tart (43).

This bluff, sexist dismissal notwithstanding, a later passage seems to underline Wain's sympathy with the arty inclinations of Froulish and Betty. In the context of Froulish launching an impassioned rebuttal of criticisms of his creative work, Wain writes:

Gone was the usual neurotic unrest and gloom; he was a living proof that every man is biologically equipped with marvelous reserves of power to be called on when defending what he really believes in (58).

There is seems to be a groundswell of sympathy here with the artist's struggle, with an accompanying passion to this resolve. In this somewhat absurdly drawn character there lies a genuine belief in the strength of his artistic endeavours/choices, and the value of the possibility of art, which is a defining characteristic of the cynic sensibility as time progresses, even though at this stage it is effectively in embryonic form.

As already stated, the Britain of the post war period was experiencing many variable and opposing pulls – for example, between left and right, nationalism and post-colonialism, private enterprise and public, older gender roles and newer etc. The cynicism, which can certainly be termed so, found in John Wain and Kingsley Amis' early 1950s novels and which is the starting point of the cynic sensibility's kicking against the pricks, is a little conflicted. The narrative conclusions of *Hurry On Down* and *Lucky Jim* suggest an easy resolution, and indeed I find that a turbulent structure of feeling isn't really articulating itself clearly or passionately enough in each of these works. The sensibility is there to be seen, but certain things are holding it back – narratively and philosophically, mainly. In the former sense, there is a predictable structure which is dependent on a neatly resolved “happy” ending. In both texts, there are straightforward love stories that, in both Wain and Amis's work (perhaps underscoring the both novels' varying degree of picaresque) – depict hypergamy and its obverse. Veronica and Christine represent upward sexual mobility in *Hurry On Down* and *Lucky Jim*, respectively, whilst Rosa and Margaret are both different kinds of clichéd, negative female tropes. In Rosa's case, Wain paints a stereotypically defined working class young woman – full of “ingrained decorum and reticence” (187) – with a family who are (revealingly) fond of the “cheap American-style cigarette” (185) and “pints of dark tea” (186). Margaret Peel's character – supposedly modelled on Philip Larkin's long-term partner Monica Jones – represents downward mobility for Dixon not due to her class background, but for her apparent neuroses. A source of anxiety for Larkin after the novel's publication – after all, “Monica's voice, looks and clothes

are...ridiculed on page after page” (Motion 239) – Amis chooses to deemphasise any emergent sense of independent mindedness that a female junior academic may have had. Instead, her character is mercilessly parodied by Amis, and this is accompanied by disclosure of an apparently manipulative nature vis á vis Margaret's failed suicide attempt. These tendencies are redolent of what Sinfield termed the “repellent misogyny of much Movement and Angry writing” (*Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* 81), and directly transmitted encoded insecurity about their own class position. Marrying up is, thus, a way out of such estrangement.

The conclusion of *Hurry On Down* is not hypergamy - Lumley finds his niche as a comedy writer (foreshadowing the satire boom, interestingly). More cloyingly, Dixon couples up with Christine, of a higher class background than his own. The cynic is thus rewarded for breaking out of the professional straightjacket of provincial academic employment– in escaping, he gets the girl, but also finds a new career. A certain upwardly mobile streak is rewarded, and presented as plausible – and London is the place where fulfillment occurs. In both novels, the deliverance of the heroes results in the act of going to the big city, where opportunities apparently abound. An embrace of this interestingly contrasts with the perception of the modern city in modernist classics like T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) - “My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart/Under my feet” (2539). Escape to the metropolis is a common theme amongst cynically inclined writers. Though technically a non-British writer (and thus not fitting within the context of this project), Irish-American J.P Donleavy's novel *The Ginger Man* (1955) presents a similar scenario, where the protagonist Sebastian Dangerfield

leaves the squalor of Dublin city to end up in London. Although there is a definite sense of this fading away in later works – compare the conclusion of *Lucky Jim* with Osborne's *The Entertainer*, say, or the cynicism towards London seen in John Lennon's mid 1960's songs or press interviews. Nonetheless, Lennon escapes the strictures of London for the excitement of New York City; America, by this time, in the context of the cynic is a vista to be embraced, rather than railed against.

A sense of derision, withdrawal and lack of commitment is preesent in Amis and Wain, yet this changes and becomes something more expressly Romantic and suggestive of iconoclasm in the drama of John Osborne, to be discussed in the next chapter. Iris Murdoch's novel *Under The Net* (1954) mixes a sense of the cynicism of Amis and Wain, without the same defined aspects as outlined in the introduction to this cultural history, with a degree of idealism and an interest in philosophy which is all its own. Related to the nature of a Britain in flux at the time, Murdoch is *set* in a London milieu, rather than describing the process leading toward London. She write about a city which has a café culture that embraces Parisian Left Bank style-esque existentialism, Marxism (to an extent) and an interest in philosophy and of fate. Its hero – a would-be writer and sometime translator named Jake Donoghue – is somewhat of a bon viveur, and engages in pseudo-Platonic dialogues with his friend, the self described “blundering” entrepreneur/film producer Hugo Belfounder. Donoghue subsequently – and clandestinely – publishes a book called “The Silencer” based on these dialogues, hoping (vainly) to profit from these private conversations. Thus, as an avowed plagiarist of a close friend, Jake is a less bluffly rendered anti-hero

than Lumley or Dixon, respectively. Depression and contemplation is more actively treated in Murdoch's work; in the aftermath of Jake's deception the first person narration portrays his anguished mental state:

I fell during this period into such a melancholy that, although I saw Hugo as often as ever, I found it extremely difficult to talk to him. I would sometimes sit for hours in his presence, silent except for such brief responses as were needed to keep him talking. Hugo soon noticed my depression and questioned me about it. I feigned illness; and the more worried and solicitous Hugo became concerned my condition, the greater grew my torment. He started sending me presents of fruits and books, tins of glucose and iron tonic, and implored me to see a doctor; and indeed by this time I had made myself really ill (66).

Rather than the scattershot and comic ups and downs shown in Amis and Wain, Donoghue is treated as being in turmoil, lacking even the possible consolation of his plagiaristic work being successful:

Meanwhile *The Silencer* was being treated to a few lukewarm reviews. Such reviewers as undertook to say anything about it at all had clearly found it unintelligible. One of them labelled it 'pretentious and obscurantist'. But on the whole no one paid much attention to it. It was a quiet flop. So far from its opening to me a career of literary fame, it did my reputation considerable harm, and I came to be regarded as a solemn highbrow with no powers of entertainment (67).

Donoghue's point of view is apolitical and cynical; he states that "work is a curse" in a drunken conversation with the socialist crook Lefty, but is derided for his lack of artistic or philosophic ambition by his guru-like friend David Gellman. Donoghue seems fairly content, and adroit also, at his chosen profession of translator, and is rewarded in this respect at the novel's conclusion. There is a picaresque element to the book - like *Hurry On Down*, the hero moves towards a sense of self-validation - but there is also copious references to literature (contemporary writing like Beckett, but also references to Dryden), philosophy (Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone Weil) and a certain digression into stream of consciousness at times – thus, intertextuality enters the cynical world. Whilst cleverness or "street smarts" is definitely a characteristic of the cynic sensibility, an inclination towards the modernism and overt engagement with philosophy is not. Yet this is would be an unfair point of view. She is not really of the cynic lineage in that she, in a sense, is too idealistic or possibly open minded in her writings. Murdoch does reference the literary and the philosophical, but this is not *necessarily* incongruous with later cynics. The tradition which integrates more of the literary comes back with some of the experimentalism of John Lennon later, or the intensive sitting room ranting and emotionally intense philosophising of Osborne heroes Jimmy Porter or Archie Rice, or indeed the literary referencing in the songwriting and/or popular media utterances of Morrissey and Mark E. Smith. Also, Donoghue's pose is similar to that of Lumley's and Dixon's, and end of the novel underlines his a faith in the beauty of the ordinary (even though the conclusion has been reached by way of more questioning/pondering). Upon seeing a box of newly

born kittens and being warmed by their cuteness, Jake responds to Mrs. Tinck's thought about how the Siamese and Tabby crosses don't really look right. "I don't know why it is...it's just one of the wonders of the world" (*Under The Net* 286).

Wain, Amis and Murdoch were all widely read novelists, and their published works reached a decent amount of the reading public. Their styles were not overly sophisticated or modernist which certainly helped (with Murdoch displaying some exceptions – see above), and much of the most exciting passages of the novels occur in a pub or as a result of the existence of a pub. Thematically, they all concerned themselves to a great extent with the contemporary. "The ladder" to success is a key aspect of 1950s Britain, whereby you sacrifice your class origins in order to "get on". Jim, Jake and Charles are all skirting this task; contrast this with the attitudes of Charles' old headmaster (the beautifully named Scrood) or the jolly good medical student Burge in *Hurry On Down*, who guilt-trips the hero about his lack of ambition. Indeed, at the start of the novel he congratulates himself for having "remained stationary; if he had been surrounded by the well meant fatuity of those who had always sought to 'guide' him, there was no telling what disastrous steps might already have been taken" (5). Indeed, class mobility in general was something which would no doubt have resonated well with a popular audience of the time. The problem of inbetweenness is a definite factor, and something which I feel that Wain captures brilliantly. In one of the passages which contains some of his best writing, he describes being in a pub, drunk after deciding he has no future with his former

girlfriend Sheila and her lower middle class “respectable street” milieu, alone, becomes suddenly acutely aware of the class tension in front of him:

The establishment, or at any rate this particular room of it, was predominantly working class in atmosphere; consequently it was peopled by raw, angular personalities who had been encouraged by life to develop their sharp edges. His sharp edges, on the other hand, had been systematically blunted by his upbringing and education. (18)

Then there is an odd moment when Charles, the lower middle class grammar school educated boy, is asked for a light. Instead of hurriedly fumbling for his matches as he normally would, he drunkenly ignores the request, happily oblivious. After the reiteration of the request, he takes out his box slowly, then drops them on the ground as the box was the wrong way up. He leans clumsily down to pick them up, bumps into a man at the bar and causing his pint to spill. He eventually lights the match, but can't find the cigarette in his inebriated state, and so he flicks it away with drunken frustration and obliviousness in equal measure – this connects with a man with a moustache and sets it alight. There is a commotion, but rather than scrambling out in the midst of shouting for his head, he merely strolls calmly out the door. Wain writes of Lumley's transgression, breaking “the sacred law of self-effacing, mute compliance – he had made, the phrase ran, an *exhibition of himself!*” (20) This seeking to escape class restrictions and divisions, and to rail against the backwardness of this position, must indeed have been a big preoccupation, and it is possible that the pub was the arena for this to be played out. Whilst the public house context for Wain is somewhat



of a tense, passive-aggressive battleground at this juncture in *Hurry On Down*, a knowledge and embrace of pub culture is a mark of definite distinction and release for Murdoch's Donohue and Amis's Dixon. Kenneth Allsop characterises Murdoch's hero brilliantly in the following passage, selected aspects of which could certainly be applied to Jim Dixon:

Jake in *Under The Net* is a remarkably attractive fellow, with the sort of honest dishonesty that is irresistible. He knows his own character with clear shrewdness - "anything rather than original work"...he has that wonderful taxi-driver knowledge of Inner London that such bums usually do possess: he could sketch a route between any two points, linking them by a chain of pubs - and not just any pubs: the ones worth drinking in. He has that practical back alley know-how indispensable to one of those shadowy men of letters. He knows what times the parks open and shut; he has a "psychic capacity for finding drink at all hours": he can lead you to the best all-night coffee stalls; and he knows that "one doesn't have to walk far in the streets of London before coming on a hairpin", the only implement he needs for picking a lock. Yet Jake is not actually a criminal and is basically indifferent to money, which he regards in a Brechtian way as being so intrinsically immoral that he would always prefer to get it by a mild swindle than to receive it in exchange for doing a job(*The Angry Decade*, 89-90).

Pub culture, and knowledge thereof, is an invaluable way of psycho-geographically mapping the city and navigating through the good and bad elements of city culture.

Rather than being a mark of a degenerate alcoholic, Allsop rightly sees the cachet in possessing this sort of savvy - it also points towards the value of the knowledge gained in unconventional and apparently “base” forms of socialising, far from the semi-accurate cliché of ivory towers university intellectualising. In *Lucky Jim*, the pub provides exactly this divine respite for the hero. After a frustrating debate with Professor Welch’s son Bertrand over the ethics of wealth redistribution through taxation, Dixon escapes from the fusty atmosphere of Welch’s home surreptitiously to the local pub. The novel captures the moment of his leaving the pub:

A dreamy smile stretched his face in the darkness as he savoured again in retrospect that wonderful moment at ten o’clock. It had been like *a first authentic experience of art or human goodness*, a stern, rapt, almost devotional exaltation. Gulping down what he’d assumed must be his last pint of the evening, he’d noticed that drinks were still being ordered and served...The little town and the city were in different counties; the local pubs, unlike the city pubs and the hotel he went to with Margaret, stayed open till ten-thirty during the summer, and the summer had now officially begun...As a result, he’d spent more than he could afford and drunk more than he ought, and yet he felt nothing but satisfaction and peace (54 – my italics).

The camaraderie and the simple joys of being in a country pub - with its slightly more flexible licensing laws - brings satisfaction and peace; it is equivalent to “the first authentic experience of art or human goodness”. Following on from this, Pete

Brown's effusive history of the pub pinpoints the central importance of this establishment in British culture:

Alehouses became the focal point of a community. If you needed to find someone, chances are that's where they would be. Alehouses served as polling stations, banks, courtrooms, theatres, even lawyer's offices. All human life was to be found there, most of it the worse for wear (65-66).

There is a consistent thread of anti-modernism, or perhaps anti-intellectualism, in both Amis and Wain's works. Common sense rationality and intellectual theory are presented in opposition to each other; in *Lucky Jim*, when Jim Dixon first catches sight of love interest Christine, his bluff analysis of his feelings contrasts with the (apparent) views of "Aristotle or I.A Richards":

For a moment, as she and Bertrand came up, Dixon caught her eye, and although it held nothing for him he wanted to cast himself down behind the protective wall of skirts and trousers, or, better, pull the collar of his dinner-jacket over his head and run out into the street. He'd read somewhere, or been told, that somebody like Aristotle or I.A Richards had said that the sight of beauty makes us want to move towards it. Aristotle or I.A Richards had been wrong about that, hadn't he? (107)

For a start, Aristotle and I.A Richards - thinkers separated by about two thousand years - are casually conflated. They are also key contributors to literary-aesthetic theory, yet their half-remembered thoughts are dismissed casually as "been wrong

about that". In this social situation, high cultural, educated concepts cannot compare to "ordinary" experience; the effect is one of elevating the common sense of Dixon, whilst deprecating the academic, uncommon sense of an Aristotle/Richards. The coalescing of seemingly highly contrasting high and low culture categories occurs slightly later, where a reminiscence about classical education occurs to Dixon when sharing a clandestine, romantic cup of coffee with Christine:

He remembered some Greek or Latin tag about not even God being able to abolish historical fact, and was glad to think that this must apply equally to the historical fact of his drinking out of Christine's coffee cup (149).

## **Conclusion**

To return to Connor's analysis of the post-war novel, Connor dislikes the tendencies in literary criticism to blanket dismiss elements of the popular/unpopular (or low/high) literary cultural experience. He is in favour of using a more fluid conception of the differing ways in which readers engage with texts - a "loosened sense of readership" (22) as it were. Rigidly demarcated senses of literary association served a purpose of dividing consumers into different classes of reader in the past; if you read this novel, you must be of the cultured elite - but this is ignoring the inconsistencies of this position. Where did you read it, how did you read it? And, indeed, how can any one meaning be privileged over all others (22)? In Kinglsey

Amis's terms, extolling the virtues of the tavern articulates a sense of his own status as a more fluid kind of reader; comfortable with elevating elements of pub culture, as well as co-existing in the academic world. Thus, high and low references coincide to imply the comparative lack of importance of such set categories. Murdoch, Amis and Wain collectively portray some of a new intellectual and artistic impulse in society, with differing emphases. The wonderment inherent in *Under The Net* (and perhaps its heightened seriousness) places Murdoch apart from Amis and Wain in terms of the cynic sensibility. However, her interest in delving into the expression of intense, existential psychological states connects her work with later cynics such as John Lennon and Morrissey. Collectively, they also represent the starting point of what Dominic Head identified as one of the key elements of fiction writing from the 1950s onwards:

The post-war novel has done much to discredit a rigid distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, and, indeed, the prominent protagonists, from Jim Dixon to Bridget Jones - characters that have been rightly seen to typify new social moods - have invariably had popular, or at least middlebrow tastes (6).

Together they sum up a sense of the conflicting cultural forces and impulses of the early 1950s, and set the scene for the development of the sensibility into an early apotheosis in the mid 1950s – through the plays *Look Back In Anger* and (in particular) *The Entertainer* by John Osborne.

## Chapter 3 – *Just Another Sunday Evening*

John Osborne has been variously termed (amongst other things) an angry young man, a socialist, a conservative, and a wilful artistic iconoclast. His position in 1950s drama has been, alternately, de-emphasised and over-emphasised. Randall Stevenson is critical of his dominant position in dramatic histories of the post war period (c.f. *The Last Of England*; by contrast, the contemporary critic Kenneth Allsopp was utterly convinced of his central importance. His treatment of female characters and nostalgic attachment to Imperial values lends itself to a critique of his work as inherently backward, quasi-imperialist, sexist and unreconstructed. Yet his key 1950s work - particularly *The Entertainer* - represents various strands of a sensibility in British popular culture, extending from the Movement writings of the previous chapter, through to the Beatles, and onto 1970s drama, The Smiths and beyond. The cynic sensibility - drawing on Peter Sloterdijk's dictum that "modern cynicism presents itself as that state of consciousness that follows after naive ideologies and their enlightenment" (*Critique Of Cynical Reason*, 3) - occurs in the wake of the death of overarching grand narratives. It entails synthesising an engagement with popular culture across traditional high and low cultural lines, an overall disengagement from direct political action and a Bohemian/quasi-Romantic attachment to the role of the artist.

Key to this concept is Raymond Williams' idea of a structure of feeling. Nebulous as this term has appeared to some critics (E.P Thompson's contemporaneous review of *The Long Revolution* in the New Left Review is a seminal example of this), it is a cogent and useful tool

when considering links between distinctive texts and discourses existing across the whole of a culture, illuminating hitherto ignored connections. In this section, my focus is on, particularly, Osborne's post-Suez crisis play *The Entertainer* (1957), as well as his essay 'They Call It Cricket' from the zeitgeist surfing anthology *Declaration* of the same year, with some reference to his seminal breakthrough play *Look Back In Anger*. In the context of this project, John Osborne is particularly interesting as a case study, as he seems to represent a broad fusion of this structure of feeling, engaging with popular cultural forms less gingerly than precursors of this sensibility like Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Iris Murdoch and John Wain. Osborne articulates with force a sprawling, ambiguous dissent (without real political engagement), and a concept of the individual artist-creator as a potential catalyst for real cultural change and critique. Osborne's mid 1950s work represents opposition to society seeking to dwell in cosy, complacent domestic boredom, where "nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening" (*Look Back In Anger* 10).

With regard to 1956's *Look Back In Anger*, Osborne's breakthrough play, it may seem strange to consider the vituperative protagonist Jimmy Porter in relation to the work of Oscar Wilde. Aside from the parodic reference to the cucumber sandwiches of Lady Bracknell in Act 2 of the play, the measured irony and absurd satire of Wildean comedy seems a world apart from the more sprawling dialogue of Osborne's. Yet in Wilde's essay *The Soul Of Man Under Socialism*, there is a vision of a utopian, artist-

driven socialism which seems a precursor to Jimmy's attitude. Jimmy is a sweet-stall owner, redbrick university educated but renouncing or unable to engage with conventional career growth. He lives in a close to menage-à-trois situation with the good-natured Welsh whipping boy and friend Cliff, and his long-suffering, perpetually ironing wife Alison. Prior to the action of the play, he had lived with another friend Hugh and his wife Alison - clearly desiring and seeking out unconventionality. Lamenting the present, he longs for an age where values mean something. Wilde's approach fits well with Osborne's - socialism is an imagined, (literary) utopian state where private property and its pursuit are abolished; humanity is thus able to move towards meaningful self-fulfilment. This has artistic connotations, but it extends to self-realised people like scientists, philosophers, and fishermen:

He may be a great poet, or a great man of science; or a young student at a University, or thinker about God, like Spinoza; or a child who plays in a garden, or a fisherman who throws his net into the sea. It does not matter what he is, as long as he realises the perfection of the soul that is within him (Wilde 291).

Marriage would be abolished, which could be advantageous to the fractious couplings of *Anger* and *The Entertainer*. Individual agency is more important than a centralised and governed system; the result of such governance is tyranny and, again, this is under-theorised, but this is precisely what dovetails with Jimmy's pivotal role as the key speech-giver in the play. "The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all (291)". Self-realisation is in itself a form of artistic



embodiment - "it has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want...Art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known." (271). The role of foreshadowing the future is something which Osborne clearly believes in, even if it is in a quasi-Romantic fashion, if somewhat tempered by banal domesticity and the "kitchen sink". Porter is a man out of time, and though a revolution was not imminent, this is not to say that it could not happen; even without a dramatic change in the structure of capitalist society, Osborne did look forward, I would argue, to developments in the arts and society later:

But the past is of no importance. The present is of no importance. It is with the future that we have to deal. For the past is what mean should not have been.

The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are (283).

The popular appeal (and, indeed, the political implications) of jazz music in 1950s Britain goes a way to explain the significance of the references to the form in *Look Back In Anger*. Eric Hobsbawm, in his essay 'Jazz Comes To Europe', describes the bypassing of the avant-garde elements of jazz in Britain, with an emphasis by contrast on a sense of 'authentic' populism:

Britain escaped this phase [the avant-garde]. What it did develop, however, probably in close association with American New Deal radicalism, was a powerful bonding of jazz, blues, folk and the extreme left, mainly communist but also, marginally, anarchist. For such people jazz and blues were essentially 'people's music' in three senses: a music with folk roots and capable of

appealing to the masses, a do-it-yourself music which could be practiced by ordinary people, as distinct from those with technical training, and lastly a music for protest, demonstration and collective celebration (*Uncommon People* 367).

Jimmy is an amateur jazzist, and Osborne's (always incredibly detailed) stage directions at the beginning of Act II describe him "playing on his jazz trumpet, in intermittent bursts," (39) sounding, according to a prim, visiting middle-class friend of his wife's, "almost as if he wanted to kill someone with it." (47). Even though the jazz which Hobsbawm's describing (and, indeed, the variety which Philip Larkin lauded in his introduction to *All What Jazz*) is not avant-garde and certainly popular, Porter's statement (admittedly designed to provoke) has something of the 1960s free jazz fan: "Anyone who doesn't like real jazz, hasn't any feeling either for music or people" (47). It's interesting that the variety of jazz he describes as "real" is the one comprised of honking and skronking, something I can imagine Lester Bangs enthusing over, rather than dutiful recreations Louis Armstrong melodies. Jazz in this context is somewhat of a raw, authentic expression of "real" emotion - removed from the constraints of tune structure, it becomes a distillation of raw feeling about life (ironic, considering the often reflex anti-Americanism in Movement and "Angry" writing). In this context, Valerie Wilmer's remarks on John Coltrane and free jazz ('the new music') come to mind (famously derided in reviews by the far more conservative jazz enthusiast like Larkin): "for the player, the new music has been concerned with ways of increasing

his freedom to improvise...no sound, in fact, is considered unmusical in the New Music" (Wilmer 24). Or, indeed the quotation of noted jazz pianist McCoy Tyner which gave Wilmer's book its title: "Music's not a plaything - it's *as serious as your life* (258)".

Identifying his precursors as being in the established theatrical canon, Osborne proclaimed in his essay 'They Call It Cricket': "Shakespeare didn't describe symptoms or offer explanations. Neither did Chekhov. Neither do I" (*Declaration* 60) - sets out Osborne's self-perceived seriousness and lineage quite clearly. Vitality and "structures of feeling" (Williams 132) is an issue that must be considered now in relation to Osborne's work: the feeling of dissent before being integrated into an emergent formation. His follow-up to *Look Back In Anger*, *The Entertainer*, articulates once more (albeit perhaps in a less vigorous sense) the idea that energy and movement is a substitute for more substantive, directed action. Jimmy Porter's rage is incandescent, sure, and is a positive act in its self-expression. Yet from it, no change comes - the domesticity is reinforced at the play's close, and Porter's talent-less but certainly energetic trumpet-playing perhaps crystallises this; a sound signifying unfettered, raw emotion, freewheeling and scattershot. So it is with *The Entertainer*, although Archie's energy is not so much in anger but encapsulated in a frustrated anguish, punctuated by intermittent outbreaks of 'playing up'. Dan Rebellato's analysis of the meaning of this in the 1950s is illuminating:

The political force of *Look Back In Anger* lay not in the target's of Porter's anger, *but in the anger itself* (italics in original): the experience and spectacle of

someone, caring, feeling, living. When Archie asks 'Why should I care?', we do not answer him by listing world crises, but by an affirmation of the humanising, unifying quality of caring itself (Rebellato 36).

By emphasising the positive qualities of emotional release (something that Osborne identifies as alien to the English middle class in 'They Call It Cricket'), the playwright is thus implicitly advocating a form of art which unifies people in sentiment, perhaps towards a collective sense of catharsis. If it is not catharsis, then it is at least awareness of something being wrong, and through the illumination of a work of art to be aware of making it better somehow. This is the truly positive side of the cynical sensibility of Osborne - reifying the position of the isolated artist, possibly, but suggesting an idealism which is not a million miles away from the idea of literature as a tool of liberal humanist improvement (ibid 23).

In the introduction to *Declaration* – the essay collection in which Osborne's polemical 'They Call It Cricket' first appeared - the editor Tom Maschler identified the common characteristics of its contributors, "sharing a certain indignation against the apathy, the complacency, the idealistic bankruptcy of their environment" (7).

Essayists anthologised in this work included the Free Cinema (and – later- feature film) director Lindsay Anderson, as well as authors such as Doris Lessing and the afore-analysed Wain. Lumped together as an example of supposed rising anti-establishment sentiment in the U.K, the scope of the collection was far too sprawling and incoherent for some commentators - see the criticisms in chapter two of Harry

Ritchie's *Success Stories*, chapter two, for instance. However, Osborne's essay - marked by a consistent sense of indignation - still has some power. In it, he attacks traits of the Establishment/right (the *Daily Mail*/*Daily Express* and their absurd tone re: atomic energy - 65), the technocratic and pious mainstream left (David Marquand, the Labour party - 68), the institution of monarchy (69) and even treats his own working class background rather unflinchingly, though far more sympathetically than the complacent upper middle class (80-81). The energy with which he writes is relentless, and he attacks rigid class positions from different angles. Suffusing this analysis is a realisation that what passes for civilisation in Britain won't do, and a (tentative) hope for something better. Perhaps it is even slightly utopian, for he does refer to an imaginary future "socialist and Republican Britain". Whilst these tendencies are certainly somewhat political, albeit muddled, it seems to fit in once more with the semi-Romantic artistic approach of Osborne. Underscoring all of this is a definite sense of the value of individuality and the individual artist's perspective - if Osborne were to advocate some systematic mainstream political approach, he would lose the artistic freedom to be an equal opportunities critic. The implication is that the artist's role is not to align - or, indeed, to confine - himself to a cause, and to emphasise his individual perspective, placed explicitly in the tradition of Literature as highlighted by the epigraph to this section. It's also oddly reminiscent of nothing so much as the character of Christian in at the opening of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, shunned by his contemporaries, solitarily reading and lamenting in the fields:

"I looked, and saw him open the book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled: and not being able longer to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry; saying, 'What shall I do?' (39).

A key aspect of historical cultural critique in Britain - delineated in *Culture and Society* - is the persistent critique of industrial capitalist society as producing a class of "mass human beings". Raymond Williams rejects this tendency in strong terms:

The masses are always the others, whom we don't know, and can't know. Yet now, in our kind of society, we see these others regularly, in their myriad variations; stand, physically, beside them. They are here, and we are here with them. And that we are with them is of course the whole point. To other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people (299).

To refer to a mass as a sort of general otherness cannot serve as a catalyst for the cultural studies project to come - to account for the processes of so-called "mass culture", to analyse popular culture and the ways of living of ordinary people. Implicit in this is a breaking down of barriers, of moving beyond seeing culture purely with a capital C, as a marker of hierarchical distinction - if cultural history is a sprawling project (Catherine Belsey's opinion that "the cultural history I should like to see us produce would refuse nothing" [160] in "Towards Cultural History"), then it must at least attempt to encompass concerns outside pure close reading of the text.

One of the key aspects of Osborne's work is the tension which exists between interacting forces - what Williams would have characterised as residual, emergent and dominant. On the one hand, it is somewhat nostalgic for the days of music hall - the present disintegration versus the immovable past, etc. But this is to ignore the significance of Archie Rice, the central character who, if emblematic to an extent of a traditional culture, is also morally suspect, selfish, preening and arrogant. Rice is witty, charming and to a certain extent appealing, and we surely feel a certain sympathy for the decline of his vocation. Yet to place it in this rarefied museum context is to ignore the contemporary resonances of music hall in other forms. Raymond Williams viewed it, in his chapter "The Social History Of Dramatic Forms" of *The Long Revolution* (written in 1963) as a "very mixed institution", with a "direct line from the chaos of the 18th century theatre through the music-halls to the mass of material now on television and in the cinemas" (291). He goes on to criticise the tendency to dismiss the contemporary in favour of an idealised past (possibly with Osborne's work in mind):

If you don't like it in one century, you can't reasonably like it in another, and the attendant features of fashionable booms, fantastic salaries, and high-pressure publicity are all equally evident in music-hall history (291).

If we accept the "direct line" argument, the question is not how music hall represents a better past in the play, but how it can hint at contemporary or future events.

Interpreted in the context of this continuity, Rice is a failed entertainer not because

his milieu has declined, but because his own ability is lacking. In contrast to this, Osborne's comments on seeing noted music-hall star Max Miller perform a Charles Laughton impression in the introduction to his collected *Plays 2* are interesting:

A smoky green light swirled over the stage and an awesome banality prevailed for some theatrical seconds, the drama and poetry, the belt and braces of music-hall holding up epic. This, the critics would later tell me, was the Brechtian influence on the play (vii).

Firstly, the supposed influence of Brecht is attributed to a quirk of the music-hall form, rather than as some self-consciously theatrical gesture, suggesting a kind of naive, possibly unintentional, innovation as being over-interpreted ("the critics would later tell me") and then attributed to a continental drama theorist (as if such moves could not be made without first being sketched out by an intellectual). There is a sense of Osborne's scepticism towards the idea of modernism also. Then, more importantly, Osborne describes the music-hall of that period as being "on its last legs, but there were still a few halls in and around London for me to visit, not yet quite defeated by grey, front parlour television" (vii). The straight opposition he creates here between forms underlines Osborne's bias. Music-hall is a formerly vital form now fatigued; television is merely "grey". This view of tv is reflected by most of the other works I am looking at in this period - the image of the docile family sedated by the cathode ray in Reisz's *Saturday Night And Sunday Morning* and Richardson's *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner* is crucial. Alan Sinfield in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-*



*War Britain* identified this as a key characteristic of this era of literature - writers extolling the virtues of more niche art forms/practices in the face of the encroachment of the dreaded "popular" or "mass" entertainment. In his view, this move took away the possibility of a fusion of the oppositional tendencies of 1950s literature with genuinely popular ascendant forms - pop jazz of the dixieland variety is great, skiffle is a dilution of this, but rock and roll is utterly banal, and they are both taken to exist in completely different spheres despite being common popular art forms. Alan Sinfield saw this identified this snobbish distinction in the 'Class/Culture/Welfare' chapter of his *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*; somehow, more crass forms of bourgeois commercialism consistently resurge so as to be decried:

Dissident middle-class intellectuals may be right-wing, left-wing or liberal: they may imagine a 'return' to traditional structures, attempt an alliance with the working class or other oppressed groups, or try to find a compromise between radical intuitions and the prevailing system. The consistent feature is hostility to the hegemony of the principal part of the middle class – the businessmen, the industrialists and empire-builders (41).

There are certainly elements of the "mass culture" as nefarious development idea at work here also. Thus, it took a while longer for literary worlds and popular culture enthusiasts to truly meld - perhaps initially in the tone and spirit of Schleisinger's *Billy Liar* (more on this later), but coalescing in the rise of The Beatles, embodying a more all-encompassing, popular perspective. As an aside, Osborne's stage directions at the

beginning of *The Entertainer* specify - "music: the latest, the loudest, the worst". At this point, I quote Williams again, referring to the state of drama in the early 1960s:

...the confusion of forms, and in particular the separation, very evident at some points, between minority and majority drama, are seriously limiting factors. It is obvious that we are living through a revolutionary period in which the creative response through new forms is clear. At the same time these normally depend on minority social groups, and the emergence of a relatively unified audience, like the medieval or Elizabethan, seems unlikely in the theatre, though in the cinema and television it may be in the process of formation (*The Long Revolution* 297).

I would continue this to identify the dichotomy as perceived between minority and majority concerns within artistic creation. The emergent writings of the likes of Amis and Larkin hold onto for dear life to residual "great works" (be it old school jazz or old school literature), and are sceptical about more cross-cultural, less bourgeois dominated forms such as television drama, popular music or working class literature. Likewise, Osborne seems to give a nod to the popular and might represent an iconoclast to some, but falls into a conservative nostalgia for a now irrelevant historical form - as Williams put it in relation to the above quoted division of theatrical forms, "there can be decadence in apparent expansion (ibid)."

This longing for connection to the past seems significant in the choice of Lawrence Olivier to play Archie Rice. Known for playing English Kings as well as tragic heroes in

Shakespearean plays, the shift from portraying hero to out and out anti-hero (“a third rate comic writhing in a dying profession” - Osborne, *Plays 2*, x) is interesting. It is interesting to note here that Olivier stated years later that “I am not Hamlet, I am Archie Rice”, suggesting perhaps that becoming a failure in performance is potentially the lot of every person who gets on stage. Olivier (and Vivien Leigh) were also considered close to royalty at the time. Osborne might be using the image of Olivier to underline the point about the decline of a particular English way of life - just as music hall is portrayed as in a terminal state, so is Olivier, certainly an English icon, through his portrayal of Rice. But it also highlights the power of a key central image to Osborne. The face of Rice is, as a result, far more striking than an anonymous actor’s would have been, given Olivier’s dramatic currency as well as his fame. Thus it is doubtful whether the power of *The Entertainer*’s performance could be re-articulated by another actor, in a different era, to a different audience; the impact of the play has to take into account Olivier’s own place in British culture at the time. Randall Stevenson’s literary history of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *The Last Of England?* hit the nail on the head in relation to the significance of Olivier's casting to the political message (such that it has) of the play:

By using the demise of traditional music hall to represent the wider decline of England, Osborne communicated frustrated nationalism rather than any of Brecht’s revolutionary socialism. Olivier’s charismatic performance in any case

made individual character and psychology a stronger interest than wider political themes (296).

This deals with two crucial points: the role of “star-power” and “the image” in the delivery of the play, and the history/position of music-hall in British culture versus the history/position of jazz. Regarding the first point, Barthes must come into play; with the second, the “frustrated nationalism” Stevenson identifies is posited along with the influence of jazz on Osborne. Raymond Williams astutely compared Osborne’s breakthrough *Look Back In Anger* in *Drama From Ibsen To Brecht* to a work of pop: “a set of blues rhythms rather than a set of social problem plays” (290). A household name and a crossover figure between traditional high and low cultures, Olivier nonetheless was a figure synonymous with Englishness, and an unequivocally positive Englishness at that. Famous for roles in Hollywood heritage cinema adaptations of classic English novels as well as starring/directing in many Shakespearean films, he may, in this context, be interpreted (following Barthes in ‘The Myth Today’, the closing essay in *Mythologies*) as a generally positive mythological image of English identity. Referring to French society, the idea of nation was once a progressive force, historically, to rebel against the aristocracy. Now (in the 1950s), “the bourgeoisie merges into the nation, even if it has, in order to do so, to exclude from it all the elements which it decides are allogeneous (Communism) [138].” Barthes terms Myth gives “historical intention a natural justification (142)”, and it is precisely this naturalising effect evident in Olivier’s popular image. Handsome,

articulate, brave, virtuous in his fictional guises; a tremendously skilled actor specialising in portrayals of characters of the Bard (particularly many heroic English Kings and Princes) and part of an apparent "fairytale marriage" of sorts to Vivien Leigh. *The Entertainer's* debunking of this myth has two results - the positioning of a (seemingly) static symbol of a positive national spirit in the context of desperation, torpor and decline (corresponding to a myth of the myth - "the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn" [132]). Secondly, it produces a sense of the frustrated nationalism highlighted by Stevenson. There is a sense that Archie Rice was one point in the past smooth, successful - once "golden". Whilst seeing the falling apart of this symbol as negative, it is at once implicating the negativity of the myth, and, simultaneously, the negativity of its passing. Here Benedict Anderson's writing on nationalism are significant – it is neither an unequivocally positive phenomenon, or wholly negative. Yet the implications of the imagined community are nonetheless stark:

Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (7).

Olivier's casting as Archie Rice was indeed controversial decision. John Osborne recalled that:

At the beginning of 1957, the muddle of feeling about Suez and Hungary, implicit in *The Entertainer*, was so overheated that the involvement of Olivier in the play seemed as dangerous as exposing the Royal Family to politics (Osborne, ix).

It is interesting to note this element to Olivier's titular role, and it points to the importance in British society of a figure existing above (perhaps) squabbling party politics. Grandeur and dignity seem opposed to dealing with political matters, even if the treatment of the Suez crisis (prominent, given Archie's son is killed in the conflict), the suppression of popular revolt in Hungary and CND is ambivalent. Why should this be thought of as provocative, given the ubiquity of these issues? The offence caused to both Left and Right which Osborne recognised is perhaps the real source of interest. Osborne did not nail his colours to the mast, which, if he did possess any, were definitely not red or blue. By voicing this sentiment - even if the most sympathetic character is Rice's reluctant activist daughter Jean - points to a wider cultural 'structure of feeling' in Britain at the time. The Suez crisis did not wipe away British imperial sentiment, nor did the nascent CND eliminate jingoism, or prevent the embrace of the Cold War. If popular fiction, following Roger Bromley's arguments on popular fiction, promotes "common" or "good sense" with an associated resolution or pay-off (even *Look Back In Anger* does this), then Osborne's (relatively) popular drama follows not from this. The play ends in despair, its conflicts not having been resolved. Yet if you approach these conflicts in the context of other theorists, more

sense can be made of this. Raymond Williams' theory of the interaction of different aspects of, respectively, residual, emergent and dominant cultures in any era speaks to the complexity which may be found within literature. Texts can be shown not simply to "reflect" society (as if society was a single, indestructible monolith), but to display the cultural forces and tensions *interacting* within the text. These tensions are not - and cannot - be resolved in totality, but rather exist, above or below the surface and point to a living culture. Cultural theorist Frederic Jameson identifies in *The Political Unconscious* three distinct "semantic horizons" (75). in the interpretation of texts which can be discerned in the analysis of literature. These frameworks are "of political history, the narrow sense of the punctual event and a chronicle like sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us." The use of the term 'horizon', as Jameson states in a footnote, points to the work of Gadamer in *Truth And Method*. The first historical basis of textual analysis culminates in viewing a work as a "*symbolic act*" (76); the second as an example (or utterance, as Jameson puts it) of "great collective and class discourses" or "*ideologeme*" (ibid - italics in original), essentially small units of ideology. Spawned from both of these aspects is an "*ideology of form*" (76), generated by the part Hegelian, part Marxist "ultimate horizon of human history...and by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the

modes of production (76).” Breaking this rather technical style down into more simplified discourse (and application to actual texts) is something that Jameson does with mainly the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel in *The Political Unconscious*, but I will now attempt to apply this to *The Entertainer*.

Firstly, the historical sequence. It would be beyond the realms of my ability (or word limit) to treat of every single significant contemporary event in and around the production of *The Entertainer*, but I will attempt to condense this into various major points of interest which have - consistently and justifiably - been the concern of historians and literary critics of the period. The play appears in the context of the aftermath of the Suez crisis (associated with Imperial decline), increased general affluence (and an attendant change in patterns of entertainment consumption), mass migration to the U.K (primarily from the West Indies) and broad mainstream political/economic consensus (Labour and Conservative parties both occupying the centre ground in the former, an embrace of ‘Butskellism’ in the latter). In embryonic forms are ideas of comprehensive secondary education over grammar/secondary modern schools, and expanded access to higher education through new universities and the polytechnics. Let us go through some of these aspects in order. Suez obviously hangs heavily over *The Entertainer*. Archie rejects political consciousness; his daughter (reluctantly) embraces it, and her grandfather laments the departing certainties of empire. The Rices’ son is killed in ignominy, yet this does not shift the play’s focus to political polemic. War is a fact of life and pacifism is not an option,



although going to war is, in this case, somewhat of a jingoistic exercise, symptomatic of a residual cultural attachment to (fading) colonial strength. There is a sense of Suez mattering and not mattering at the same time - Marwick, in his seminal *British Society Since 1945*, notes "the speed with which passions cooled" (101) over the affair. This lack of real engagement on the part of the electorate (who quickly split on party lines on the subject) was mirrored by the government's in the opinion of recent historian of the post-war period Dominic Sandbrook. Anthony Eden's government "acted as they did simply because they felt they had to do *something*" (*Never Had It So Good* 26) - not considering the outcome of invading the Suez to quell Nasser's nationalism, but rather needed to reassert, bluntly, a sense of military vitality (the central idea of vitality in contemporary British literature was identified by the aforementioned Dan Rebellato).

Affluence does not seem to have impacted much on the Rice family, given his struggle to maintain his career. Are things better for the Rices' in the context of the "never had it so good" era? Of course, MacMillan acknowledged that this was true only for "some people". The increased migration to the U.K (with associated social problems - the Notting Hill race riots in 1957, for one) prompted more self-questioning on the topic of British identity, and whether this could be defined with or without reference to race. If it was to be defined as a racial category, Enoch Powell's anti-immigration stance and fondness for classical references appealed; if not, liberal-minded politicians emphasised the "brotherhood of man" thesis (I can't, incidentally, locate

any politically liberal or left-leaning equivalent to Powell to advocate the advantages of an open immigration policy *or* a more socially defined take on English/Britishness).

The existence of a broad Keynesian political/economic consensus, which devoted itself to encouraging economic growth through public spending, a flexible tax policy and a politically pragmatic but economically unsound acceptance of inflation. This more explicit consensus seemed to fragment when “dynamic” Harold Wilson self-consciously aligned the Labour party with scientific and technological progress, but in truth this was only a by-product of image management, the Labour party largely only being superficially different (the Conservatives, though proportionally older and from a different class, weren’t against the same sort of progress that Wilson marketed).

Going beyond this, however, is to look at the structural aspects of the text, inferring from these a deeper (Jameson would suggest, following Levi-Strauss, a kind of myth-based) meaning. Formally, social realism is fused with the Brechtian connotations of music-hall. The central image of the eponymous failed hero connotes decline, but also grandeur (through his portrayal by Olivier). But how can we get from this to “transcending the purely formalistic...by construing purely formal patterns as a symbolic enactment of the social within the formal and the aesthetic (77)”? To draw further on Jamesonian analysis is to identify the tensions in capitalism manifested in the text. In one sense, there is a “synchronic” embodiment of dramatic form contained in Osborne’s play - the integration of popular cultural forms (music-hall, comedy) within a 1950s work not only calls to attention the ‘serious’ treatment of pop, but the

history of drama itself. Classic English drama from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century fused bawdiness, tragic incident, song and comedy - this was delivered to a contemporary popular audience (what would have been termed as “the masses” in the 1950s).

Raymond Williams places this in a specific historical milieu in *The Long Revolution*:

The drama was kept going, throughout the period of its Elizabethan greatness, by popular support certainly, but by a kind of popular support that would have been crushed if the court and the nobility had not extended its active patronage (276).

Thus the form was sustained and protected by popular audiences with upper-class support and endorsement; a fusion of differing social interests which Williams suggests produced its characteristic “unexampled intensity” (ibid 277).

Going further back, these same elements, coupled with a more democratic sense of participation through the use of guilds, is a key aspect of vernacular medieval drama like the mystery plays - “the integration of dramatic performance, not only with the religious festivals but also with the life of the medieval town” (ibid 272). If drama as a form has become more bourgeois, it was not always the case - the synchronic reality is hinted at in the fusion of past elements in *The Entertainer*, not to mention (this is to reiterate) the choice of the iconic Shakespearean actor Olivier in its titular role. In a diachronic sense, a conception of the progression would place Osborne in the context of a reaction against English drawing-room comedy and the dandyism of Wilde, perhaps embodying a sort of naturalism with “Brechtian” elements (in Osborne’s

view, gleaned from pop culture). I would also argue that elements from popular fiction are evident, through the cynic sensibility I am describing as well as thematic concerns including hypergamy, “getting on”, vague political affiliations, a distaste for the present post-war settlement etc.

Jameson, following Ernst Mandel, identifies a sequence of progression between different eras in the history of capitalist development (*The Cultural Turn*, 34-37). In relation to Osborne, the idea of the transition between the imperial capitalist era and the 'late capitalist' is instructive (“the third stage of capitalism” - 35. The historical situation in Britain has changed and an older sense of imperial dominance has waned, but perhaps not altogether faded away. The “ideology of form” of Jameson’s in this sense corresponds to a definite stage in capitalist history - formal characteristics are not divorced from their historical bedding, but composed within it. This is not to oversimplify “late capitalism” as a transcendent, dominating and determining idea (underlined by Jameson’s own varied writings on theorising, historically, the postmodern period in full-length book or essay form). It is the “ultimate horizon”, sure, but not one which is removed from both diachronic and synchronic conceptions of form, past and present. This is reminiscent of Williams’ analysis of the interaction between residual, emergent and dominant cultures in *Marxism and Literature*:

The complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions...but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements...In authentic historical

analysis it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance (121).

This is not to mention the differing views of culture as philosophical progression ('ideal'), the works of a given time ('documentary') and the lived experiences of all the people ('social') [*The Long Revolution*, 57]. Williams terms, for a start, the residual as culture that is:

Effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue - cultural as well as social - of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (*Marxism and Literature* 122).

Within this, Williams believes residual cultural formations can be "alternative or oppositional" (122), to greater or lesser degrees, but can also be ineffectual - a contrast summed up by the value placed on the countryside by environmental activists (residual, perhaps, but alternative) or by holidaying bankers (conservative). The next category is 'emergent', the "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship" in a society. Harder to pinpoint than residual processes, Williams characterises emergent forces as vulnerable to "incorporation",

the danger of which is the ambiguity inherent in this occurrence - deceptively, co-opting an emergent form “looks like recognition...and thus a form of *acceptance*” (125). This does not entirely eliminate their meaning - “elements of emergence may indeed be incorporated, but just as often the incorporated forms are merely facsimiles of the genuinely emergent cultural practice ” (125).

In a residual sense, socially, the character of Archie connotes fading Imperial value. Culturally, the form of the music-hall is, accurately, portrayed as fading (though, as stated earlier, the key characteristics of this form have been transplanted into television and new forms). Archie’s adherence to a dying art, therefore, is tragic, as it can never be revived in its older manifestation. The form of *The Entertainer* points to the emergence of television also. As an “emergent” cultural formation, I would argue that this is demonstrated through the use of Olivier’s image (the kind of promotion and “star power” soon to become equally crucial to cinema and television producers alike), the playfulness of the integration of song and direct speech, its easy adaptation onto the screen, etc. But perhaps more important is the sense of an emergent cultural voice, quickly incorporated - the sense of dislocation, lack of place, of lower middle class ennui, embodied by the young character of Jean. She represents the emergent and oppositional, engaging (albeit reluctantly) in popular protest, resisting the more conservative opinions of her family. Indeed, she could conceivably be termed the “soul” of the play, even if Archie is the central “dead behind these eyes” anti-hero:

You see this face, you see this face, this face can split open with warmth and humanity. It can sing, and tell the worst, unfunniest stories in the world to a great mob of dead, drab erks and it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because - look at my eyes. I'm dead behind these eyes. (Osborne, *Plays* 2, 66)

Again, however, within this cynical sensibility, there is no sense of a Romantic resolution, but a dead end. Why is this so? The happy ending of previous texts discussed - from *Hurry On Down* to *Look Back In Anger* - speaks to an ideological (following Jameson and Bromley) or dominant cultural position (following Williams) whereby the major protagonist seems, more or less, to settle happily back into society. There is a sense at the close that the system works to an extent or *can be worked* (Wain and Amis), or an escape can be found in domesticity (Osborne). The close of *The Entertainer* rejects this, suggesting that, in this nihilism, it is far more apolitical than the previous texts. Out of this fictive destruction of an older form and dismissal of Archie's "way of life" (notwithstanding Archie's father Billy Rice's repetitive, desperate-seeming statement to Jean that "you don't know what life can be like"), there is a clear sense of emergence, and significantly, embodied in a female character - a quantum leap from the treatment of Alison in *Look Back In Anger*.

The question of class tension is also ambiguous. This is not a loving portrayal of working-class life or love, but nor is it an endorsement of direct political engagement, or ascending the ladder. In contrast to the rhetoric of John Lehmann - "we are very

much nearer a classless society in 1955 than we were in 1935" (quoted in Stuart Laing 59), Osborne challenges the idea of a broad socio-political consensus by presenting much fragmentation in the post-war "New Jerusalem". Thus, *The Entertainer* appears to me to be the strongest articulation of the cynic sensibility of this period - it is uncompromising in its refusal of politics, its serious treatment of popular culture and its rejection of the pursuit of material gain. By embodying so many conflicts between cultural formations, it points the way towards a kind of resolution of sorts later, in The Beatles, particularly John Lennon.

Osborne's phlegmatic essay 'They Call It Cricket' is inescapable in any treating of his 1950s politics. Whilst a general suspicion of ideological commitment to any cause other than pragmatism could be said to exist in British culture even to this day, Osborne is at the very least unapologetic about expressing raw feeling on the topic. One side of this shining through this work – and one which was not so much in evidence in *The Entertainer* – is the palpable sense of contempt for the royal family and the institution of the monarchy.

When my play *The Entertainer* was produced, it was complained that one of the characters was 'vaguely anti-queen'. Now, if this character was vague in the way she expressed herself, it was because of the existence of the Lord Chamberlain's office compelled it ('They Call It Cricket' 68).



After this suppression due to the intervention of the office of the notoriously censorious Lord Chamberlain - whose work Osborne described as "a betrayal of liberty" (*Damn You England* 163). Nicholas De Jongh categorised the office as follows:

Lords Chamberlain, appointed by the monarch from the ranks of senior courtiers, naturally reflected the values and views of a conservative aristocracy. They were reactionaries, with little capacity for reflection. The men appointed by the Chamberlain to help run his department, the Comptrollers, were mostly upper-middle-class, retired senior officers from the armed services. In the twentieth century they tended to be intelligent and diplomatic, but also often were philistine, with little knowledge of serious drama and its traditions (xi).

In the context of *The Entertainer*, Osborne's "vigorous alternatives to the dull, doctored stage language of the time" were heavily criticised by the office. Their specific ire focused on sexual references, albeit in a humourously random manner:

In almost every case the banned words, phrases or sentences had sex periphrastically in mind. 'Ass upwards', 'clappers', 'pouf', 'shagged', 'rogered', 'turds', 'camp', 'wet your pants', 'had Sylvia', and 'I always needed a jump at the end of the day and at the beginning as well' all had to be removed from the text. Phrases such as 'Poke the fire', 'pissed up', 'a couple of fried eggs', 'she needs some beef putting into her' and 'Have you ever had it on the table?' were,

however, all permitted. It was hard to see any consistency about the Chamberlain's rules (ibid 183).

Free from the vagaries of such stage censoring, Osborne's sentiments are therefore allowed free rein in *Declaration*. Combining invective against a portion of the general public as well as the duplicity of the Labour Party, Osborne writes:

It bores me, it distresses me that there should be so many empty minds, so many empty lives in Britain to sustain this fatuous industry...I don't believe that there can be one intellectual in the Labour Party who doesn't find it hilarious or contemptible. Naturally they would never dream of losing all those votes by saying so...(Declaration 77)

Its existence in the mid-20th century is "a ridiculous anachronism" and an obstacle to true political progress due to its "regard for implicit ruling-class ideals like 'restraint', 'good taste', 'healthy caution' and so on" (Declaration 78). On this note, it could be interesting to connect this quotation with the next section as the points of criticism of socialism (in his mind) are essentially the values which were stereotypically associated with early 1950s drama, implying class conflicts being enacted with British theatre. The casual approach to nuclear proliferation by the Tories is referred to. *The Daily Mail's* story about the significant others of those who made the H-Bomb is critiqued thusly:

The H-Bomb Wives' is called them. There were photographs of them - Ordinary British Housewives. One of them was shown holding her baby. No one knows at this time whether one day some Japanese housewife may hold up a baby that is not quite so well-formed or healthy because of a few British husbands and their game of nuclear cricket. (66)

A day out at the cricket is equated polemically with military mass-murder; clearly Osborne recognises the hypocrisy of an imperialist power, priding itself on its civilisation, but engaging in barbarism just beneath the surface. If the criticisms are too belicose or all-encompassing, he counters: "I believe we are living at a time when a few 'sweeping statements' may be valuable. It is too late for caution." (65)

Yet Osborne's criticisms are bi-partisan. Another focus of derision is left-of-centre Labour party politician David Marquand, who Osborne quotes as saying, in an essay lamenting the preponderance of 'Lucky Jims' in 1950s Britain that "the chaos of contemporary Britain can only be cleared away by social salvage units, not neurotic misfits cut off from Society" (70). Marquand's good intentioned and worthy social salvage project is ripped apart, supposedly implying a totalitarian urge to bureaucratically "equalise" society, rather than necessarily to enhance freedom and equality. In contrast to this, Osborne sought to resist definition or political co-option:

I am not going to define my own socialism. Socialism is an experimental idea, not a dogma; an attitude to truth and liberty, the way people should live and treat each other. Individual definitions are unimportant....I am a writer and my

own contribution to a socialist society is to demonstrate those values in my own medium, not to discover the best ways of implementing them (83).

Perhaps unconsciously echoing Wilde, Osborne privileges artistic freedom "in the piggery" (84) as he puts it, in an exaggeratedly self-deprecating manner, to work productively defining a possible new society over and above conventional cross-party political hypocrisies. Again, this is untheorised and certainly not the work of a political scientist (like Marquand's), but it seems that principled individuality, articulating dissent without joining a movement is infinitely preferable to a life in the unheroic sphere of modern politics - a culture where being "about as vague as you can get without being actually invisible" (*Look Back In Anger* 15) is actively encouraged.

## Conclusion

In the context of our neo-liberal consensus, there is an odd lesson to be learnt from the (now) pretty unfashionable 'Movement' and 'Post-Movement' schools of writing. As termed by the left-wing writer Richard Seymour in his recently published *The Meaning Of David Cameron* (2010): "If all parties agree on the fundamentals of the Thatcherite agenda that David Cameron proposes, then Thatcherism is just centrist common sense as far as the centrist political class is concerned" (13). By contrast, in the context of the post-war "consensus" (essentially centrist, but with an emphasis on

Neo-Keynesian economics), writers spawned from the expansion of working and lower middle class education dealt with tensions which seemed to centre around a shifting class politics. Cultural tastes was and is a marker of distinction (following Bourdieu), and writers of this broad moment referenced a combination of forms which were not entirely “popular” (or populist - say at an Agatha Christie level - and a distrust of ‘mass art’, echoing or foreshadowing Hoggart - take your pick), not entirely “literary” (not Joyce and high modernist classical music). Keen to emphasise their intelligence but also their division from the multitude, this generation lost an opportunity to bridge the gap between an elite conception of culture and an ascendant, perhaps more broadly relevant, consciousness of ‘ordinary people’, creating a new subcultural ghetto for itself surrounded by jazz of a certain era. As Alan Sinfield persuasively argues:

Jazz – and the same was true of folk music – was regarded as an authentic music of oppressed people – of Blacks and the lower classes before they were spoilt by Hollywood, advertising, rock-'n'-roll and the record industry. If offered the ideal imaginary resolution of the gap between new-left and lower-class culture: it was the 'good' music which the working class would have been performing if it hadn't been got at (263).

The inherent reactionary conservatism in this also harked back to the good old days when men were men, women wielded ironing boards and the commonwealth was an Empire. Subjective (to a degree) but certainly class-bound judgements on art (privileging certain kinds, excluding others - sometimes in a haphazard way) in this

era prevented a genuine engagement with more popular forms, and prevented a better understanding of the same. In doing so, the cynical works I am looking at in the 1950s in some sense played up and re-encoded the rigidness of the British class structure. This system is, to a degree, characterised by its rigid oppositional nature - each strand can be said to be in conflict with one another. But, this is a static conflict. The "ladder" as such may be ascended, but this is an affront to your roots/original class (with Richard Hoggart's "scholarship boy" character type, in *The Uses Of Literacy*), or your human dignity (the renunciation of conventional success in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*) and, having ascended this ladder, your new class position is contingent on a mutual animosity with those above or below your socio-economic status. There is, aligned with this, a perverse enjoyment, and it seems the cynics of this era articulate this quite well. The vital energy and anger of Osborne crashes against the rocks of perceived injustice, but is just as constant and effectively powerless as the waves. The kicking against the pricks is relished, yet concrete political analysis or conclusions are avoided, or thought "impossible" in a common sense way. Yet the process is continuous and, eventually, positive. "Wage labour creates abstract value. It is productive without being creative." Osborne and his sensibilities both reflect *and* extend beyond their era, believing, however cynical they may be (or indeed its flipside - naivety), in the power of a creative work to achieve *something* - the importance of the act of creation and the ability to work is a key characteristic of the cynic.

## Chapter 4 – *That's What I'm Not*

As a transitional point in the cynic sensibility from the 1950s into the 1960s, this chapter will look at four examples of the so-called 'New Wave' of British cinema. All of these films were adaptations of existing literary works - two from a novel, one from a short story, and one from a stage play. Two of the four – the Shelagh Delaney written *A Taste Of Honey* (1961), and *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner* (1962), based on an Alan Sillitoe short story - were directed by Tony Richardson. Richardson had previously made his name as a theatre director of work by the so-called Angry Young Men, as well as through film adaptations of John Osborne plays *Look Back In Anger* and *The Entertainer*. Karel Reisz directed *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), an adaptation of Alan Sillitoe's text, whilst John Schlesinger directed *Billy Liar* (1963), based on the novel by Keith Waterhouse. The films I will discuss have been characterised largely by a tendency towards realism, as well as a fairly strong attachment to their literary source texts. As a result, some critics have viewed the British 'New Wave' as being too indebted to a staid form of British realism. The crucial appeal of the form rests in the fact that, in spite of a relative decline in cinema attendances, it was still a medium which particularly resonated with and appealed to a youth audience. The proliferation of television sets - treated caustically in *Saturday Night and Sunday* and *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner*, where being glued to the tube with its "flow of vacuous adverts" (Hill 153) is indicative of a sense of

numbness and disconnection - "increasingly supplanted cinema's role as the means of family entertainment par excellence" (Aldgate & Richards 185). In this context, Kitchen Sink films may truly to be said to have had more of a niche appeal, and less of a widespread popular audience. Nonetheless, as Stuart Laing identified in

*Representations Of The Working Class:*

The overall decline in admissions had the effect of increasing the proportion of the audience in the young adult category. This group had always had a disproportionately high representation among cinema audiences but by 1960 this position was one of absolute majority. Despite the general audience decline 44 per cent of those between 16 and 24 still attended cinemas at least once a week and a further 24 per cent at least once a month (110).

Lastly, in contrast to the Nouvelle Vague from whom their tagline is derived - exemplified by auteur writer/directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut - the U.K version took its cues from rather less experimental sources. This being said, some connections are still evident between these apparently disparate currents.

In terms of the bohemian/Romantic element of this, there is a resolute focus on the plight of the individual hero in each of the four films to be analyzed in this chapter. As John Hill identifies in his seminal work on late 1950s/early 1960s British cinema *Sex, Class and Realism:*



The plots are conventionally organised in terms of one central character...as a consequence, there is an ideology of individualism cemented into the narrative form: it is the individual's desires and motivations which structure the film's forward flow...Thus, despite the surface rhetoric of class war occasionally mouthed by Colin in *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, his trajectory through the movie is basically an individual one (137-138).

As well as this focus on the individual, there is a portrayal of (and identification with) unconventional living in this selection of films. *A Taste Of Honey's* depiction of a uniquely complex (and unusual for the time) familial environment (e.g lead character Jo's romance with a black sailor leading to her pregnancy, as well her cohabitation with the obviously homosexual Geoffrey) shows a sense of flux and a breaking down of gender and racial barriers in supposedly average, "real" North of England. In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, there was almost a successful abortion shown, apparently censored by a rather anxious British Board Of Film Classification who considered this as one of its "highly objectionable themes or incidents" (Aldgate & Richards 195). And in *Billy Liar*, Fisher's potential deliverance from the fictional Yorkshire Dales town Stradhoughton's banality is through the prospect of realising his creative ambitions by becoming a comedy writer akin to Lumley in *Hurry On Down*. Fisher's imagination fuels the surreal cut-away sequences in the film, presenting himself as the key subject of Pathé newsreel footage, drawing room drama with clipped, R.P delivered dialogue and trench warfare. As Stuart Laing identifies:

Billy's desire to be a scriptwriter is unfulfilled within the narrative, but it is the basis of the film's escape from the realist conventions of the New Wave. While in the stage play the fantasies remained verbal, the film offers them as fully realised images and sequences which, themselves, are frequently cinematic (134).

Fisher is also wedded to the idea of never committing to a single partner, seemingly rejecting straightforward coupledness and assimilation into normal provincial life; the only love interest who is considered a possible match is the rather less provincial, more free spirited Liz.

Politically, there is an argument to be made that by presenting hitherto neglected aspects of British working class existence an implicitly egalitarian politics is hinted at. However, none of this translates into real political action in any of the films. The voices of Arthur Seaton (from *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*) and Colin Smith (from *The Loneliness of The Long Distance Runner*) seem to underline this, both created out of prose by Sillitoe. In relation to Colin's predicament, the combination of "individual psychological motivation...and hints of an existential revolt" conspire to render "Smith's rebellion less political" (Sinfield 257-258); both could be said to be byproducts of adolescence, and thus examples of transient growing pains rather than committed dissent. Arthur's cynical distaste for 'the bosses' (or the factory 'Establishment' as such) is crystallised in his voiceover exhortation to the viewer - "don't let the bastards grind you down". His own sense of individualistic refusal - "whatever people say I am, that's what I'm not" - diminishes, or perhaps eliminates,

any real tendency towards collective class consciousness, whilst simultaneously bolstering his own ego. Colin Smith, meanwhile, early on in *Loneliness*, delivers a tirade to his fellow Borstal boys, deriding “all the governors, all the teachers, all the social workers”, voicing his desire to put their backs against the wall. In this context, it is a sort of inchoate anger at work, but again directed at some established authority or authority figures, rather than in any sense of activism. Smith's tone (albeit a more articulate one) is similar to the reactions against authority of the “non-conformist” teenage comprehensive school children, who sociologist Paul Willis conducted an ethnography with in the 1970s. In his stencilled Centre For Contemporary Cultural Studies paper 'How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs' (1976), Willis writes of the motivations that these non-conformist teenagers had for rebelling in their environment:

Parallel with the disaffection from the teacher – sometimes seen as a cause of it – was an affiliation with a group of peers marked out precisely (sic) by the attempt to develop modes of activity and schemes of values which gave alternative grounds for self respect and a viable identity. Diligence, deference, respect – these became things which could be read in quite another way.

Smith's dissent is certainly opposed to deference, though expressed through the safety of gritted teeth at points. In *Billy Liar*, the only references to politics are confined to Billy's own absurdist fantasies of ruling his own country - Ambrosia - as a benevolent war hero/dictator.

In terms of the anti-modernist and cross-cultural elements of these New Wave works, there is a decided (and perhaps unexpected) esoteric element at work here. Whilst critical writing has been correct to identify the disconnections between the French Nouvelle Vague and the British New Wave, there are some elements which - in terms of narrative and plot at the least - can be connected between the two.

Francois Truffaut's work, for instance, whilst perhaps being more experimental in its direction, is often concerned with pretty straightforward narratives based on a depiction of what is at least *fairly* intelligible – his debut feature film *Les quatre cents coups* (1959), for example, focuses on a kind of adolescent angst familiar to any viewer of Kitchen Sink cinema. Its focus on the Truffaut's personal, autobiographically based story on the misspent youth of hero Antoine Doinel, features numerous elements that are echoed in British work of the period. Though admittedly a few years younger than the late teen/early twenties demographic that the British New Wave heroes represent, Doinel rebels against his parents, his school, gets in trouble with the law, and - though not necessarily a loner - is portrayed as being somewhat of an individualist. His personal release is through an immersion in cinema-going, just as Colin Smith finds release through long distance running. Thus, to an extent, in terms of content rather than form (as far - or as little - as they can be separated), there is a connection between the ostensibly higher artistic "modernism" of the Nouvelle Vague, and its British cousin. In terms of literary antecedents, French cinema did at this point take some of its cues from the Nouveau-Roman, pioneered by Alain Robbe-Grillet, which was devoted to cutting away many aspects of older realist forms such as linear

plot, direct language, neat characterisation etc in order to create a more experimental kind of writing. Following from this, there has been a tendency to view French output as inherently closer to Art as opposed to a perhaps more staid British approach. Yet both movements adapted texts from popular literature – albeit with the French New Wave using such texts, at times, more as raw material to be subverted rather than faithfully executed genre film making. A good example of this is Godard's detournement of an American dime novel called *Fool's Gold* by Dolores Hitchens, sourced as the plot basis for one of his most iconic, avant-garde works, 1964's *Bande à Part*. Certainly the work of Karol Reisz, Tony Richardson and John Schlesinger is quite a distance away from the approach of Jean-Luc Godard, with its playful jump-cuts, raw improvisations and self-consciously unrealistic cinematography. Nonetheless, it is still closer to Truffaut than might be commonly considered, and shares (even with Godard) a desire to depict reality in occasionally blunt, documentary-esque terms – Bradford (the location for *Billy Liar*) nonetheless, is still quite far away from Parisian vistas.

Another commonality between the French and British New Wave, as well as the use of iconic leading actors, from Jean Seberg to Rita Tushingham. There was an important break here also in the context of a modernising British cinema. As Robert Murphy identifies, “fifties leading men...tended to be difficult to distinguish from one another”, whereas “Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay, Peter Finch, Alan Bates (and) Terence Stamp...represented something new and exciting” (36). Star power, thus, becomes more significant in this form, and the lead actors featured herein - Finney,

Courtenay, Tushingham - can all be said to have an enduring, iconic appeal. In terms of plot, *Billy Liar* seems to represent a strong sense of crossover between different cultural forms. Written in the first place by a comedic writer (Keith Waterhouse), the film balances the tragedy of Billy's unfulfilled life in the midlands with the comedy of his consistent chicanery and misadventures - a "turning away from working-class realism towards the zany optimism which signalled the arrival of the 'Swinging Sixties'" (Murphy 71). The hero also harbours a desire to enter into the world of comedy, as well as having composed a song performed at the local Stradhoughton dance hall, portrayed near the film's conclusion. And although the ending of *Billy Liar* is laden with pathos, there is a generally more serious tone to the other three, though with some occasional comic relief. All four share a devotion to vernacular expression, so-called "comprehensibility" and realistic settings. Yet, in the character of Billy Fisher's ultimately unrequited love Liz (played by Julie Christie), you see a foreshadowing of the impending, more glamorous 1960s. As identified by critic Alexander Walker, her role exemplified "the new type of girl swinging confidently and joyously out into a future that is part and parcel of an affluent generation's life-style centred on youth, dreams and metropolitan delights. With Julie Christie, the British cinema caught the train south" (*Hollywood England* 167).

In Keith Waterhouse's novel (but not in the film), there is an interesting description of Billy's meeting Liz in the context of the Stradhoughton record shop/social space - "the X-L Disc Bar" (105) - which I feel is worth citing as an aside. In contrast to the scene in X-L's downstairs section - dilapidated, ramshackle, "scuff marks all along the

orange walls”, listening booth doors swinging open so that clashing bits pop, jazz and hymns all “collided in the middle of the shop” (ibid) - Liz is depicted, upstairs in the “classical department”. This part of X-L had

an almost public-library air about it. It was thickly carpeted, with a single glass counter and a row of grey record booths. The rest of it was empty and light and spacious, and quiet. Liz was standing behind the counter, handing a record album to a middle-aged man in a black overcoat. She was talking to him in her comfortable, plummy voice (107-108).

Hypergamy of the order of Kingsley Amis and John Wain's early novels seems apparent here. Space, restraint, quietness and reserve are all evoked by Waterhouse, as well her “comfortable, plummy voice”. Whilst Billy's work colleagues such as Stamp engage in hyperactive downstairs, Liz's role of a gate keeper of Culture (albeit in a retail sense) is emblematic of her representation of escape. This escape is not necessarily into a life of spiritual fulfillment (or even *excitement*), but one into an apparently sophisticated middle class milieu. Interestingly, the carefree, 'swinging' portrayal of Liz in Schlesinger's *Billy Liar* contrasts with Liz of the novel – the former version wishes to cajole Billy into escaping Stradhoughton for London at the narrative's climax; the latter rejects Billy's desire for London for “oh, just – Doncaster” (184). A key change has seemingly occurred between the book's publication in 1959 and the appearance of the film version in 1963. The importance of this change was highlighted by Stuart Laing:

Like Miranda in Fowles's *The Collector*, Schlesinger's Liz indicates a moment when the image of the attractive intelligent and (semi-) liberated young woman was allowed to emerge from the constraints imposed by the first decade and a half of post-war society. A defining element here was the rejection of the 'domestic' as a space for the creation of female identity (220).

The rejection of consumerist values is a preoccupation of, and apparent in, each of the four films discussed here, to varying degrees. As John Hill puts it:

For what also emerges as a theme in these is the corrosive effects of a modern, mass, commercialised culture. As Karel Reisz explained of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*: 'the film began to ask the question whether material improvements in people's lives weren't going to be accomplished by a spiritual crisis (150).

Key scenes negatively depicting the ills of capitalist society abound in all. However, in two of the films the slant is towards criticism of the process of consumerism and burgeoning acquisitiveness in the "never had it so good" era. In the others, the focus is more on the ill-effects of the drudgery of labour, redolent of *Under The Net* hero Jake Donoghue's declaration that "work is a curse". This is, at the same time, not to say that the two forms of criticism do not coincide. *A Taste Of Honey* portrays a side of England that is resolutely unglamorous in its squalor. There is no love of the idea of conspicuous consumption - the character of Jo's mother Helen is an avaricious consumer, but also largely unloving and more inclined to spend time with her "fancy



man” rather than with her daughter. Jo’s exile from the family home seems mainly prompted by convenience and the desire for her mother and her man to be alone, rather than be in the company of the inconvenient daughter. More basic, breadline pursuits are valorised in contrast - there is a dignity to the way in which Jo and Geoffrey live which seems in opposition to Helen’s living conditions. Furthering Jo’s marginal nature in this regard are the social pressures evident at the time; Lesley A. Hall writes that:

Women who were in relationships with immigrants tended, according to the well-established stigmatizing tradition in discussing mixed-race marriages, to be classified as prostitutes or at least wayward delinquents...with additional concern expressed about potentially problematic mixed-race offspring (140-141).

As well as this, the inherent sensitivity of Jo’s perspective contrasts with her mother’s harsh pragmatism. A resonant line is the desire of Helen is for Jo not to repeat her mistakes by getting pregnant out of wedlock; of course, Jo does exactly this. Is Jo’s seemingly disinclination to be a good consumer, and her self-questioning spirit, merely a byproduct of her youth/adolescence? Will this spirit be ultimately crushed by the demands of having to be a “productive” human being? Though Delaney’s writing in *A Taste Of Honey* suggest a cynic’s move away from the rat race, there is also a foreboding gloom over the ending - Jo’s moving back in with her mother is, again, a move back into her old, conventional home, and could be a catalyst for Jo merely becoming assimilated into the same sort of life which her mother leads. In contrast to

*The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner*, the ending does not seem nearly as defiant against “the system”, as it were.

Also directed by Tony Richardson, *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner* and its central character Colin Smith, comes out far stronger in favour of rejecting the promises of the affluent society. Colin’s father, a former trade unionist whose death is recounted in flashback form in the film, is apparently a man of principles; there is an implication that his death resulted from over-work. However, in the aftermath of the bereavement payout to his relatives, his widow, Colin’s mother, is shown to be enjoying the high life. Material wealth makes monsters out of supposedly close companions - she is shown to be more concerned with living a superficial existence, spending money on sundry consumer goods in lieu of mourning. Connected to this is the “never had it so good” economic prosperity of the late 1950s Macmillan era, fused with Colin's – and, indeed, a wider society's - fear of advertisement and consumer driven way of life. Reflecting this were contemporary “Fabian proposals for a tax on advertising and measures for greater consumer protection”, opposing the so-called “economics of waste” (Mort 64-65). Happiness through consumption seems to outweigh loyalty, and by symbolically burning a pound note in his father’s old room, Colin signifies his rejection of this value system. Though Smith’s family are shown to be of a working class background, the reaction of his mother to receiving a payout suggests that values of thrift are no longer in vogue. Everyone is free to be a free consumer, and older class solidarities and divisions do not matter as long as one can buy a television. Seemingly, this is indeed part of a new, emergent thinking –

influenced by Keynes – in British culture of the time. Rather than producing alienated dupes, passive and disconnected in their armchairs, embracing the mass market was in fact actively *good* for the country:

Advertising's role in stimulating demand for consumption goods, in regularising output and flattening the booms and slumps of the trade cycle, thereby contributing to a general lowering of prices and an increase in quality, were among the standard themes announced by the new apologists for promotional culture (68).

Smith's opposition to this is raw, and as suggested by Hill's earlier quotation, is definitely an individual's pursuit. But there is a heroism within this. Valuing romance and some degree of residual class loyalty over playing the game, Smith's refusal of what appears to be the conventions of the "dominant" structure of feeling is manifest in the circumstances of his robbing of the factory, as well as rejection of the chance to win pride of place for his Borstal at the close of the film. In the former case, he does not seem to value the importance of private property, and it is merely a means to the end of having some security in lieu of an actual job (and targeting the management, of course, seems to imply a stronger identification with the workers). Yet even with this he stashes it in what seems to be an incredibly careless place - up a drainpipe - obviously not oblivious to the fact that the temperate climate of Britain often brings rain with it. In the latter scenario, he remains true to the sentiment of his speech early on at the Borstal, where he expresses his wish to see the assembled mass of authority figures that he has ever encountered up against the wall to "let 'em have it" if he "had

the whip hand". Rather than allow himself to be co-opted by that particular system - and in doing so giving himself an easier time, and possibly greater opportunities - he chooses to exercise his own individual defiance. His reference earlier in the film to the "whip hand" also points out the derision in which he holds authority figures generally; they are effectively equated with slave-drivers.

The rejection of work in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, as hitherto stated, is closer to the sentiment of Jake Donoghue in *Under The Net* as opposed to a rejection of consumerism per sé within *A Taste Of Honey* and *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner*. Albert Finney's monologues as Arthur Seaton reinforce this - work is a means by which the bosses can run (and, indeed, ruin) people's lives through consistently pushing their employees to work harder and harder for little increased reward. Seaton feels as if he has the system worked out, and works only the amount of time for which he will be paid well. A cynical approach for certain, but it is as if the character has worked out that the solidarity inherent in previous working class formations in Britain is gone and never coming back. Assembly line production/Fordism serves to alienate the individual and turn him into a drone via repetitive tasks - Seaton seems to realise this, and does not want to get sucked in. He also can't see himself as part of the team - rightly or wrongly, he perceives his co-workers as cogs in the machine, and more inclined to be in thrall to their bosses rather than their colleagues; therefore, Seaton keeps his distance. He also has no qualms about having an affair with the wife of one of his superiors; he considers him unworthy of pity as he has, by virtue of his lack of virility, let his wife be unsatisfied

(this comes back to punish him later). His embrace of hedonism at the weekend is contrasted with the austere conditions more often portrayed in *A Taste Of Honey* and *Loneliness*. This, Seaton professes, is to do with his desire to enjoy himself, and not to get caught up in the conservatism of the older generation of working class men and women surrounding him in his community. As such, Seaton is certainly a part of a nascent, monied younger generation, out for a good time but not necessarily a long time, and his affluence shows throw in his leisure pursuits (largely contained within the pub). However, Seaton has a bitter hatred of the deleterious effects of the television, which he sees, like the assembly line, as a further manifestation of the desire for the powers that be to render the average person docile and mentally feeble. His vitality in this regard contrasts with the lack thereof of his passive, fellow factory working father - in a dialogue between the two, Arthur describes a gruesome accident at work to his father whilst the latter is watching television. Despite the graphic nature of the story, his father is unable to even acknowledge it in a perfunctory way, so engrossed in the gaudy entertainments of the television is he. Again, there is a sense of one man against the world here - a Romantic image of refusal of certain material comforts, and, parallel to this, perhaps a suggestion that the intoxicating effects of alcohol is at least some form of release.

In *Billy Liar*, Billy Fisher is shown to be a far more avid socialite than any of the protagonists in the other three films. He is a regular at the dance hall and is a budding amateur song-writer, has ambitions to be a comedy script writer in London and is shown hanging out at milk bars as well as in the pub. In a less alcohol saturated way,

Fisher is following the Seaton way - compensating for the drudgery of the world of work by seeking to, one, do as little of it as possible, and two, to fill his remaining hours with leisure - and, of course, his daydreaming. This is probably the biggest manifestation of Billy's bohemian and quasi Romantic impulses. In Keith Waterhouse's original novel, Billy's two forms of thought are described as "number 1" and "number 2". "Number 1" is what makes Billy's imagination so alive, and is visualised brilliantly by Schlesinger - it entails all of his fantasies and elaborate creative coping mechanisms. Hierarchically it is elevated over "number 2" thinking, which is merely the mundane negotiations of dealing with real life and its attendant machinations. In the film, key fantasy sequences of "number 1" thinking include his visualising himself as the heroic President/Dictator of the fictional "Republic Of Ambrosia", portrayed as a nation which unites all colours and creeds under his benevolent, philosopher-king persona, and re-imagining his more mundane, bluff dialogue with his parents as being revised to resembling that of the interaction between monied aristocrats and their charmingly befuddled child. His fantasies suggest the depth of knowledge that exists within Billy's mind, coalescing with an obvious knowledge of history, politics, as well as class and accent divisions within Britain. Such imaginings have no obvious material worth, but their depth of reference is without doubt intricate and worthy of some admiration - speaking to the value of art in general that is devoid of any directly utilitarian aspects. He is also devoted to the pursuit of the opposite sex, using the lure of a proposal of marriage to two different local women as a way of conning them into sleeping with him; again, it is

dishonest, but also a refusal to play by the rules of the game. There is no wrapped up ending either - unlike Seaton, Fisher is not married off or matched up with anyone at the film's close. Again, Fisher exists on his own terms, for better or worse, in opposition to what is portrayed as the conformity of his hometown. The only two exceptions to this shown are his erstwhile love interest Liz (played by Julie Christie), who seeks to persuade him to finally leave his hometown for London, and his close friend/co-worker Arthur, who acts as a comedic foil for him at work as well as a collaborator in songwriting - it must be said that both of these characters have far less screen-time than the hero.

Work in the undertakers is a source of great ennui for Fisher. It is, aptly, the symbol of a dead-end career. Towards *Billy Liar's* close, he rails against his father's advice that he should be grateful for the opportunities he's received in the course of his life. Rather than feel privileged by opportunities, he suggests that he has always been pigeon-holed and forced to be grateful for anything "good" that has come his way, from his qualification for the grammar school through his prowess in exams to his job at the undertakers. There is a sense of being forced into conforming to the expectations of his parents and family at this point, to conform to their standards of how life should be lived, which Billy himself is unable or unwilling to do. Ultimately - and depressingly - his sense of individual strength and desire to escape is outweighed by fear at the film's close, and he is unable to follow through on Liz's invitation to come to London with her; he stays in Stradhoughton, and the film's generally comedic tone is once again undercut by tragedy. In the Alan Sillitoe scripted films, the use of

the voiceover narration adds further to the sense of an individual's destiny being played out, as well as the centrality of both Arthur Seaton and Colin Smith's personal driving forth of the narrative. The viewer is thus given a deeper, monological insight to the respective travails of both individualistic heroes, and though Seaton is certainly more of an anti-hero than Smith, this is nonetheless a move which gives the audience more sympathy for both of their plights. Hill's analysis is instructive here:

As with the New Left itself, many of the economic changes wrought by 'affluence' were taken for granted; it was the value of their moral and cultural effects which were open to question. Politically, this tended to lead to a representation of the working class as largely inert and conformist; it is only individual members of the class who are able to rise above or rebel against this general condition. Industrial action and organised political activity are absent and, by implication, increasingly redundant. 'The class war' might not be quite over in Macmillan's sense, but it certainly has become contained and constricted (174).

Due to the pressures of convention and commercial concerns, so-called Kitchen Sink cinema does not only have broad stroke approach to politics, but has the same trouble when it comes to gender issues. Hill, once more:

The same could not be said, however, about the 'sex war'. In common with the writings of the 'Angry Young Men', there was more than a streak of misogyny



running through the films and a failure to acknowledge the changing social and economic role of women in British society other than as consumers (ibid).

There is no doubt truth in this. In none of the four films discussed is there a portrayal of actual political cohesion or solidarity, and hardly any reference to the business of party politics. This form of cinema was not a thoroughgoing critique of the structure of contemporary society – essentially, it “attacked the philistinism and materialism of British society rather than the oppressiveness and inequity of its social institutions” (Quart, 15). Hill's reference to the importance of the individual's efforts is also key here - as stated previously, each hero in the New Wave films discussed represents something of a break from their own class background. Likewise, in terms of gender, there is truth in what Hill suggests - certainly in the portrayals of the matriarchs of each household, a strong sense of attachment to the value of being a consumer prevails, particularly in the case of Mrs. Smith in *Loneliness*, and Helen in *A Taste Of Honey*. Thus, the conservatism, so often associated with Kitchen Sink writing (as well as the Movement) rears its ugly head again.

But there are indeed signs of burgeoning ideas of a more progressive attitude to politics and gender inherent in these films, to a greater or lesser extent. Seaton, who may be termed by some a misogynist for his predilection for sleeping with women for the satisfaction of pretty primal urges, actually seems to become loyal to, and respectful of, Doreen, the love interest whom he settles down with ultimately in *Saturday Night*. Jo's moving out of home and into a pretty unconventional living relationship with her gay friend Geoffrey is a pretty daring move, and Delaney's A

*Taste Of Honey* is notable for centring its plot largely around the interactions between two women and a gay man, though Hill would argue the conclusion of Jo moving back in with Helen diminishes the independence and uniqueness of Jo's previous cohabitation with Geoffrey.

The conclusion of *Saturday Night*, with Arthur and Doreen contemplating the smoky landscape of Nottingham together, suggests a solidarity of sorts in the works between the two, but only to the extent of their own nascent romance. He still continues to work in the factory, and will still presumably (to some degree) continue with his cynical defiance of what should be expected of a good, deferential working class toiler. *A Taste Of Honey*, as has already been stated, does seem to lose some of its impact by its reversion to the status quo at the film's close. At the same time, the transgressive nature of Jo and Geoffrey's relationship - with Geoffrey even offering to act as a surrogate father to her unborn child - seems quite progressive for its time.

A quote from Billy Fisher to his father (played by the popular actor of Northern working class origins Wilfred Pickles), about the intense gratitude that has been forced upon him from a young age: "Grateful, grateful, grateful for this, grateful for that, that's all I've ever heard! Grateful you let me go to the grammar school." Inculcated with this sense of indebtedness, but still feeling disconnected from his parents experience of life, no doubt hardened by the experience of the depressed 1930s. The juxtaposition between Tom Courtenay and Wilfred Pickles also points to a changing of the guard, as it were - Courtenay represents a far more cynical, reflexive and less geographically bound Northerner. Pickles, on the other hand, partly made his

name for his resolute attachment to the signifiers of his regional upbringing, speaking in a pronounced Northern English accent when working as an announcer for the BBC's Home service, rather than adopting some version of R.P. *Billy Liar's* ending has a variety of implications. On the one hand, the dreamer is dissuaded from escaping his class background by his own cowardice. Yet, is this fear of failure a byproduct of the alienation wrought from years of being stranded in Stradhoughton? It is perhaps only natural that his fantasies could not possibly live up to the reality of life in London, yet his optimism is obviously not helped by the ambitionless context of his life as it has been in Yorkshire. Despite the chances that are hinted at in the course of the film for Billy to escape - through romance, or through comedy writing, or through simply running away - escape does not occur, and if anything life for Fisher at the film's close is markedly worse than at its conclusion. His guilt at having stolen the postage money for Shadrach and Duxbury Funeral Home calendar's has been found out, his duplicity with his two local romances (Barbara and Rita) has been revealed, his grandmother is seriously ill in hospital, and his relationship with his family seems far more tense than at the story's outset. If the political implications say much in this context, it is to suggest that the possibility of social mobility are not as simple as "getting on your bike", so to speak.

Certainly cinematically, there is much more of a sense of "establishment politics" (so-called) being overturned at the conclusion of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. In Colin's rejection of the opportunity to win the cross country race for his Borstal versus the local public school - essentially constructed like a normal school

race meeting, though with the two teams incarcerated in education for very different reasons - his dignified refusal stands in opposition to becoming a dutiful serf. As in *A Taste Of Honey* and *Billy Liar*, in a sense there is a reversion to “normality” at the end, but, even in a token sense, it seems that Colin has succeeded in overturning the rules and enjoyed a small victory. It is almost symbolic of the cynic’s laughter, tongue stuck out at authority, though at the race’s close Smith is too exhausted to muster any more energy than to crack a wry, half-smile. Perhaps the first element of each of the filmed texts in question to identify as suggesting a cross-cultural, popular impulse is the use in all four of the vernacular. Though each is an adaptation of a literary text, these are texts which are all readily “comprehensible”, and not engaging in much formal dexterity. The directness of the source texts are thus integrated into the form of each of the films. At the same time, the use of words such as “bloody” in the British New Wave were surprisingly offensive to censors at the time. Seemingly, the BBFC was of the view that “‘quality’ cinema should not include too much by way of ordinary parlance and some words - ‘bogger’ especially - were definitely prohibited” (Aldgate & Richards, 198). Despite the relative banality of the expression in a modern context, the apparent perversion of The Queen’s English was too much for some. John Hill rightly identifies the connection between the Free Cinema movement - for instance in Lindsay Anderson’s *O Dreamland* - its criticisms of mass/commercial culture, where “faith and belief amount to no more than a flickering of lights, surrogate art and romantic fiction (152)”. In opposition to this apparently vacuity of mass culture, the director of *A Taste Of Honey* and *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner* sought

solace in Lindsay Anderson's words a few years earlier: "from the Free Cinema manifesto, 'Perfection is not an aim' came back to me. Life was more important" (Richardson 109). Thus, realism, recognisability and the vernacular is placed in a more prominent position than experimental artifice. The democratic impulse within this is there for all to see - if a more roughly amateurish ethos is adopted, then this opens the door for a wider participation in an art-form. From the readily comprehensible verse of Larkin, to the catalysing effect of skiffle on the Beatles and other British bands, even the do it yourself drive of punk music, this is a factor which occurs again and again. A more ad-hoc approach to the artistic process also allows for the realisation of greater numbers of works of art. Even the certain tendency towards the ad-hoc has a slight correlation with the French New Wave. Writers have readily looked at the dissimilarities between the movies of the French Nouvelle Vague and the British New Wave. Of course, the scale of production of the former was far greater - between 1959 and 1962, "160 filmmakers made films, many of which were debuts, and a number of which became classics of world cinema" (Ostrowska, 1). Compared to this, the British counterpart made a fraction of this in a similar period. Critics have called attention to the literary antecedents - as stated previously in this section, the adaptations I have discussed took more conventional inspiration from realist writings; as Peter Wollen would categorise it, "an old shibboleth and laint of the British cinema establishment" (37).

Despite the anti-American biases and apparent "provincial Little Englandism" (Wollen 42) of the Kitchen Sink literature/movies (and harking back to Larkin), there

is an embrace of certain kinds of jazz in the soundtracks of each four films. In *Loneliness*, the scene in which Colin is allowed, for the first time, to embark on a training run on the grounds around the Borstal unsupervised, is backed by lively, exultant (albeit non-modernist) instrumental jazz. The production of stars on the back of these movies is also significant. Actors Rita Tushingham, who played Jo in *A Taste Of Honey*, along with Tom Courtenay and Albert Finney all launched their careers and “stardom” (to a certain extent) on the back of the British New Wave. All had forays into Hollywood cinema at some level, perhaps most particularly Albert Finney. Courtenay also has had the crossover effect of having a song by venerable American noise-rock band Yo La Tengo named after him. The song’s lyrics themselves are oblique, but also contain references to contemporaries Julie Christie and comedian/actress Eleanor Bron.

## **Conclusion**

The films discussed in this chapter essentially launched the cinematic careers of the three central actors starring in them, as well as the directorial careers of Tony Richardson, John Schlesinger and Karel Reisz. All - bar Reisz - had pretty successful forays into Hollywood cinema, perhaps Finney particularly so. Perhaps more significantly, in dealing with portrayals of a hitherto neglected British class on film, the British New Wave cinema had a pioneering role. The sense of cross-cultural

pollination is also emergent, and reflects contemporary concerns of others of the cynic sensibility. As film critic Raymond Durgnat wrote:

Those intellectuals of my generation who interested themselves in jazz, in the cinema, in science fiction, in American comics, did not ‘capitulate’ to the ‘pressures’ of the mass media; on the contrary. We deliberately chose them - or rather intuitively responded to them - both as artistic pleasures unsullied by the assumptions of our schoolmasters, and for their ‘subversive’ vulgar view of human nature” (quoted in Murphy, 68).

Durgnat’s perspective also highlights the cultural forces and motives in flux at the point of these films’ genesis. Foreshadowing the increasingly cross-cultural interests inherent in British culture at this point, Durgnat references the importance of so-called “mass” elements in formulating a new artistic approach; later in this book, we will see the tendency of Mark E. Smith to integrate references to comic books as well as modernist literature, kraut-rock along with garage rock, effectively placing them on equal footing. *The Kitchen Sink* form obliquely commented on the rigidity of class divisions itself on screen, as well as reinforcing a sense of cultural change underway within British society. In terms of the cynic sensibility, the portrayal of iconic characters like Albert Finney’s Arthur Seaton, Rita Tushingham’s Jo and Tom Courtenay’s Colin Smith and Billy Fisher gave wider exposure to visual icons of a new kind of voice within British popular culture. As argued earlier, and in keeping with the cynic sensibility as a whole, the tendency towards overt political expression as well as

questioning gender roles within British society was fairly muted - though with some “small victories”, as it were. The impending transition of power from Tory to Labour in late 1964 could be said to be obliquely pointed at - nothing could seem further from the spirit of the British New Wave than the cavalcade of aged, fusty patricians (exemplified by the then party leader Lord Alec Douglas-Home) in the Conservative government. The British New Wave also maintained the cross-cultural elements inherent to the cynic - as well as possessing a popular sensibility and a reluctance with modernism, the movement was not without its innovations (or without somewhat of a connection to her French predecessor). Literature is of course the source material, and music is also still important to the expression of the sensibility, exemplified by the use of a jazz soundtrack to some degree in all four films, as well as the strong connection between Billy Fisher and comedy/popular music, both representing relief from boredom and escape. The deferential, hierarchically organised nature of British society at the time was also reflected in the general tendencies in New Wave cinema, and the dilemma facing British working class youth in opposing this. As Richard Hoggart wrote in his late 1950s tract *The Uses Of Literacy*: “‘Only connect’ said E.M Forster, thinking of the conflict between the claims of the inner and outer life. ‘Only conform’, whispers the prevailing wind today” (Hoggart 196). His view of the potentially taste dulling effects of “modern mass entertainments” were perhaps more reflective of a personal bias against the new intellectual devil of the television set than of an emergent, popular backlash. A



concerted, absurdist reaction against this perceived conformism suffuses the subject of the following chapter.

## Chapter 5 – *I've Heard Of Politics, But This Is Ridiculous*

The traditional, classical definition of comedy - which is to some extent still relevant and workable today - is described by Andrew Stott as follows:

Comedies end happily, often concluding with a communal celebration such as a feast or a marriage. We might add that we would expect a comedy to be funny, and that during the course of its action no one will be killed. (1)

This definition is neat, but seems more applicable to a text such as William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1602) rather than, say, Enda Walsh's *The Warworth Farce* (2006). A more pertinent account of the form in a contemporary sense follows:

As a label, 'comedy' can be applied across a range of styles, including traditional categories such as pastoral comedy, farce, burlesque, pantomime, satire, and the comedy of manners; yet it also applies to more modern subdivisions: cartoons, sitcom, sketch comedy, slapstick cinema, stand-up, some game shows, impressionists, caricatures, and even silly walks. (1-2)

Such a broad, inclusive account is particularly applicable in this chapter, where the comic practitioners of the Satire Boom, the television playwright Dennis Potter, and the Alternative Comedy cast of *The Young Ones* alike draw on a wide range of comedic devices and styles. This points to their lineage in revue, as well as common background in variegated forms of theatre, gag writing, journalism etc. Potter, as well

as being a proselytiser for the boom, also wrote satire himself, and - going further than any of his contemporaries - actually engaged in the world of established politics. His experience was not a positive one, inspiring his coruscating accounts of the compromises of mainstream politics in *Vote Vote Vote For Nigel Barton*, first broadcast in December 1965. Over a decade later, *Alternative Comedy* and *The Young Ones* were, to some extent, continuing ideas advanced by the 1960s satirists, as well as consciously kicking against what they perceived as an Oxbridge dominated comedic past.

What I seek to argue in this chapter is that comedy as a category can be justifiably taken seriously, as well as being appreciated, in the face of dismissal or derision. It is also a key facet of the cynic sensibility. Critic A.E Dyson identified an ambivalence about comedy as somehow a fundamentally English vice:

The normal English attitude to humour is notoriously odd. Most of us look on it as a national asset, in wartime it becomes almost a mystique. But there is a puritanism in the English tradition which prevents the more boisterous and flamboyant types of laughter from flourishing unchecked (138).

Cultural critic Marshall Berman believed that irony was an integral tool in order to process and to understand modern life:

From Marx's and Dostoevsky's time to our own, it has been impossible to grasp and embrace the modern world's potentialities without loathing and fighting against some of its most palpable realities. No wonder then that, as the

great modernist and anti-modernist Kierkegaard said, the deepest modern seriousness must express itself through irony. Modern irony animates so many great works of art and thought over the past century; at the same time, it infuses millions of ordinary people's everyday lives (14).

Irony, thus, is also a conduit for “the deepest modern seriousness”. Kirby Olson, in his 2001 book *Comedy After Postmodernism*, argues that a po-faced, arrogant ignorance of comedy is nevertheless still commonplace, particularly in the context of the judgment of imaginative work on the basis of whether their politics are correct (or 'just') or not:

The Janus-faced ambiguity of humor (sic) renders monolithic politics and morality ridiculous. Today, anyone whose criterion of literature is that it be just would be embarrassed to be seen enjoying the work of P.G Wodehouse, which has no overt political agenda. Jeeves, however, is a prince of anarchists, one who is able to see the unprincipled character of others, even as they speak in the name of principles, and thus sidestep their rule-making and defeat them. Today such irreverence is underappreciated, as we have a canon increasingly formed on simple pieties that do not permit open questions (7).

Comedy can also be a subversive act. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his work on Rabelais, identified the potential for over-turning societal rules and mores in the context of the medieval “Carnival”, full of spectacular ritual and comic verbosity . Values and roles would be inverted, authority figures mocked and social outcasts elevated, albeit temporarily:

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival (199).

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's followed Bakhtinian ideas in suggesting that power (that is to say, of a political or a hegemonic nature) cannot regulate all elements of comedy or the carnival. Whilst this does not imply revolutionary potential to humour by any means, it does lend itself to the view that real criticism of society need not be confined to solely stodgy and dry discourse. The carnival – due its peripheral, outsider's status – acts as a polar opposite to bourgeois culture:

This act of disavowal on the part of the emergent bourgeoisie, with its sentimentalism and its disgust, *made* carnival into the festival of the Other. It encoded all that which the proper bourgeois must strive *not to be* in order to preserve a stable and 'correct' sense of self (387).

And Peter Sloterdijk, philosopher of contemporary cynicism, felt there was liberatory potential in the act of mockery itself:

The power of the underdog comes into its own individually as that cheekiness that constitutes the core of power in cynicism. With it, those who are disadvantage can anticipate their own sovereignty (110).

It must not be disregarded, however, that the process of writing and performing comedy for a crowd (small or large) is something confined to the privileged few. The exercising of a comic routine is not *necessarily* a unifying or utopian experience, dependent on a core element of passivity amongst the audience. There is a distinction to be made between the spontaneity of humour, and the specified structure of power and delivery inherent in comedy. As Stephen Wagg writes:

Comedy, unlike humour, is inherently undemocratic. Humour develops spontaneously in social situations and, in principle, these situations allow for the humorous contribution of all parties. Comedy is prepared humour, delivered to an audience, which, on the whole, is expecting an invitation to laughter; this laughter, should it transpire, will, along with heckling, define the limits of the audience's participation (*The Social Faces Of Humour* 327).

Admittedly, Dennis Potter's television plays are not comedies per sé, and funny in a decidedly more bleak fashion than either *That Was The Week That Was* or *The Young Ones*. However, there is a certain gallows humour which is evident in his work, borne out of a profound cynicism with the political process, related to the disconnection between his protagonist's public image and the reality behind it. The self that is divided into that which is inauthentic, and that which comments on that same inauthenticity; there is an element of the Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of 'bad faith' here also, where inherently changeable human consciousness seeks to possess an objectified, embodied essence.

### ***That Was The Week That Was* and The Satire Boom**

The Satire Boom of the early 1960s - manifested primarily in the comedy troupe Beyond The Fringe (Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Alan Bennett), the magazine Private Eye and (particularly in terms of popular impact) the BBC television series *That Was The Week That Was* (presented by David Frost) - occurred at a point in British history where the affluence of the Macmillan era was producing a sense of ennui at the staid, apparently conformist nature of the nation's power structures/elite. The broad appeal of this kind of satire - particularly amongst younger fans - was its devotion to taking apart the so-called "Establishment". Generally, the Satire boom had a bias towards the Labour party, but this seemingly was only as a reaction against the domination of British politics for around a decade by a generally older, fustier Conservative party; broadly, its tendencies were apolitical, pragmatic and towards the centre ground.

In relation to the cynic sensibility, there is a definite flaneur/bohemian element to the Satire boom's popularity. In the case of *That Was The Week That Was*, its critique of British society through comedy was not necessarily a constructive one. There is also an explicit connection between the satirists and the nascent "swinging sixties" trope in London, whereby divergent aspects of the entertainment business coalesced with comedy, literature and politics to (in a sense) produce a sequestered clique of their own. This is, to an extent, exemplified by Peter Cook's comedy club - The

Establishment club, whose title became less ironic as time went on - which attracted a hodgepodge of the political, economic and artistic “elites”. As its reputation as a fashionable night spot grew, the clientele was often that of privilege - thus, the satirists became drinking companions with their subject.

There is also the sense of the cynic railing against mundanity and conformity, combined with a certain distrust of perceived patrician values in Britain at the time, as well as an opposition to a widespread sense, in the 1950s, of persistent deference to institutional powers such as the monarchy, the government and, indeed, the BBC. The act of creating art which is vaguely critical of the pursuit of material wealth in capitalist society also is subversive, but the pointed edge of such an approach is blunted when the privileged background and sometimes smug nature of the new satirical movement is scrutinised.

Although most of the key (and ancillary) players in the satire boom were to become artists in their own right - from Alan Bennett’s dramatic writings to TW3 writer Keith Waterhouse’s previously discussed *Billy Liar* - the exemplary iconoclastic Romantic artist of the scene is certainly Peter Cook. Probably the most prolific and influential of the comics/comic writers, Cook was also an artistic entrepreneur of sorts, founding the Establishment satirical club in Soho, as well as being the owner of *Private Eye* magazine. Key to Cook’s artistic strengths were a sense of improvisational energy and a neo-Bohemian attachment to excess, particularly regarding alcohol. Most of his contemporaries held him in awe for the former reason; fellow *Beyond The Fringe* writer and cast member Alan Bennett complained about the difficulty he had in



following the manic, part improvised monologues of Cook as the audience had effectively been “laughed out” (“I would be handed an audience so weak from laughter I could do nothing with them” [Carpenter 124]).

Cook’s public school background and relative privilege as the son of a Foreign Office diplomat certainly influenced his development of comedic characters, “brought up on the usual English upper-middle-class diet of humorous reading: *Punch*, *Beachcomber*, *Wodehouse*” (*A Great Silly Grin* 83). Humphrey Carpenter identifies a progression from Cook’s time at Radley School, when he begins to give form to characters drawn from real experience, but skewed and exaggerated in a surrealistic manner:

The story is told that the school employed, as a waiter in the dining hall, a strange character called Arthur Boylett, who does indeed sound schizophrenic; he claimed to see stones and twigs move of their own volition, and regarded this as in some way significant (ibid 83).

Boylett apparently acted as the inspiration for the character of Grole, a recurring type of target in Cook’s humour from his time at secondary school onwards - a dim, rather ingenuous lower class man, monotone in speech but fond of peppering his conversations with bizarre and askew references. One Grole sketch involves the character accosting a man on a train on the topic of snakes:

I’ve got a viper in this box, you know...Cleopatra had an asp, but I haven’t...I don’t want one either; I’d rather have the viper myself...Not that they’re

cheaper to run, if anything the viper is more voracious than the asp; my viper eats like a horse (Cook, quoted in Carpenter 81-82).

Although group writing credits were norm for the stage show *Beyond The Fringe* as well as the BBC's *That Was The Week That Was*, individual writers were less obviously singled out as the sole authors of their sketches, even if they had written and performed them solo. Obviously this points to a different conception of the value of authorship within comedy as opposed to theatre (generally) and fiction. However, *Private Eye* magazine went further, if perhaps partly for reasons concerning legal culpability. The tendency for *Private Eye* writers to appear anonymously is dealt with by latter-day contributor Francis Wheen:

I've occasionally heard people complain that it's cowardice that people aren't prepared to put their names to stuff, but it means that although it's a disparate group of people, there is a collective voice (quoted in Macqueen 20).

The idea that a collective voice was shared defused potential offence or litigiousness that might be directed at any one writer, yet it also encouraged a group writing/creative ethos rather rare in the parallel worlds of art and copyright. Not only does it offer the possibility of multiple voices directed at a common subject or target, it points towards the benefits of close collaboration, perhaps deflating somewhat the mythology surrounding the preeminence of a singular individual artist-creator.

In considering the relationship of the satirists of the early 1960s to their political targets, they could often be said to having been as nasty as they wanted to be. In a

largely positive review of Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller, Dudley Moore and Alan Bennett's satirical revue *Beyond The Fringe*, Kenneth Tynan identified the key characteristic of both their satire and that of the boom as a whole:

*Beyond The Fringe* is anti-reactionary without being progressive. It goes less far than one could have hoped, but immeasurably farther than one had any right to expect. (quoted in Carpenter 123)

It essentially opposed hypocrisy and the idiocies inherent in political life at the time, as well as the mores and banalities of Middle England - in this sense, it was anti-reactionary. However, it offered now positive solutions, preferring to stand outside the fray and to mock. In this respect, the satire boom was quintessentially of the cynic sensibility. In some sketches, the apparently positive role that the police in British life played was picked apart, with the following apparently inspired by a scriptwriter's run-in with an over-zealous arm of the law:

LANCE *enters in policeman uniform.*

ROY: Good evening.

LANCE: Evening, sir. [*He beats ROY up.*] Just a routine enquiry, sir. (Carpenter 227)

More than anything else within the satire boom, there was, of course, the uneasy combination of seemingly railing against the older order of privileged, patrician statesmen (exemplified by MacMillan and Douglas-Home), whilst essentially advocating an alliance (up to a point) with the status quo, given that the vast majority

of the players in early 1960s satire were (often) public school and (almost entirely) Oxbridge educated. Once Labour came to power, it was their turn to be lampooned – this is shown in the *Private Eye* piece 'Mrs. Wilson's Diary', as well as in the film of a few years later, *The Rise And Rise Of Michael Rimmer* (1970), wherein parodies of Conservative leader at the time Edward Heath and Labour's Harold Wilson are both portrayed (incidentally, both the former and the latter featured Peter Cook, as a writer/originator of the concept in the first case, as lead actor in the second). Perhaps Stephen Wagg overstates the foreshadowing of free market, neo-liberal values that the satirists supposedly represent in his essay 'You've Never Said It So Silly':

The fruits of the 'satire boom' have helped the satirists themselves and many western consumers shrug off any guilt they may have felt about enjoying themselves, simply by asserting the across-the-board absurdity of it all. Thus it underwrites the apparently powerful paradox in the calculations of contemporary votes of 'private affluence and public squalor' (281).

Not every element of satire is this baldly cynical, but there are certainly ways in which their outlook can be moulded to suit both left and right approaches. Looking at the political persuasions of the significant players in the satire boom, it is clear that multiple opinions resound. Paul Foot of *Private Eye* was a committed socialist, leaving the magazine at one point to edit the Socialist Worker's Party newspaper.

Contrastingly, Richard Ingrams and Willie Rushton were Liberal party supporters. Slightly later, the Monty Python team neatly crystallized this conflict – Cleese was a centre ground Labour supporter, later embracing the SDP/Liberal Democrats, Jones

had an egalitarian, left-leaning outlook, Chapman identified as a sort of libertarian anarchist.

Terry Jones himself felt that if the Pythons had come of age in the late 1970s/early 1980s, they would've had a firmer connection to the left (ibid 275). Instead, they matured out of relative economic prosperity and the centre-ground Butskellite consensus politics, without much of a sense of an emergent subversiveness. Still, if Conservative and Labour occupied a benign centre ground, then they were sure to be criticised for somehow not being principled enough, willing to cater to voters' perceived or apparent needs and wants rather than any more grand design or ideological. Writer and - at that time - proselytizer for satire Dennis Potter, had a view which was possibly shared by many others of a more cynical bent:

Gaitskell and Macmillan came close [in the 1959 General Election campaign] to resembling two funfair barkers, with false noses and six inches of greasepaint. The shouting and the drumming get louder and louder as the big tents become tattier and tattier. Labour, however, put up a pretty good performance, and almost beat the Tories at their own game - their appeal to our stupidity and general selfishness was almost as effective (*The Glittering Coffin* 161).

If mainstream politics and engagement with the system merely meant pandering to whatever people wanted to hear at a given time, it was completely understandable that there would be a rejection of this raw pragmatism. Though with a reputation for being biased towards the Labour Party, *TW3*, *Private Eye* and the satirists generally

were simply criticising who was in power, rather than necessarily being pro or anti-Tory. Peter Cook stated, in describing the remit of his Establishment club:

The targets of sketches in the club would range ‘from Macmillan to Macmillan... it will not necessarily be left-wing...but because the Conservatives are in power it will, of course, be easier to attack what is there. Attacking the Labour Party at the moment seems a bit like robbing a blind man’ (Carpenter 132).

Thus the target for satire is reinforced, but with a backhanded swipe at Labour’s apparently blatant weaknesses. The follow-up from Cook’s setting out The Establishment club was the manifestation of, according to another Kenneth Tynan review of the venue, “a more or less definable political position, somewhere far out on the antic left wing of the Liberal Party, in other words, its attitude is one of radical anarchism” (Carpenter 147). Given that the Liberal Party at this point was even more sparsely supported than its modern day incarnation, this obviously has very limited, niche political appeal.

All the same, the equal opportunities critique of the mainstream political spectrum was to the fore - even if one of *Private Eye*’s founders Richard Ingrams correctly felt that satire had done a lot of work for Wilson’s election, “consciously or not” (293). *That Was The Week That Was* even had a sketch which portrayed electricians unable to work together due to being part of different unions, or a piece on how dithering the Labour party were on questions of basic worker organisation, coming to the conclusion that it, confusingly, was “for strikes in principle, against strikes in

practice". Underpinning this, there seemed even to be a doubt that political satire could succeed at all in changing a jot, or, if it did, it might cease to be funny/good; hence, regardless of one's personal political views, satirists could be united in the belief that it wouldn't change very much anyhow. Cook's glib quip - "the heyday of satire was Weimar Germany - and see how it prevented the rise of Adolf Hitler!" (Carpenter 137) - did contain some truth, however. Great satire had indeed been powerless to effect a resistance to the rise of fascism. However, it does seem like a neat and cynical get out clause for Cook to reference back in this sense, almost absolving himself of any inclination to even attempt a more focused, anti-establishment political critique. Interestingly, Cook himself seems to have been the most resolutely apolitical of the satirists - unlike some of his contemporaries, who were somewhat optimistic at the election of Harold Wilson's Labour party in 1964, Cook "wasn't taken in" (Carpenter 293).

Again, equal opportunities for insult were indulged in by the writers and cast of the show, and, interestingly, it was this level of overt dismissal of the centre ground of British politics which David Frost considered to be "probably the death-knell of *TW3*" (276). The piece was a prelude to the future general election, broadcast in the aftermath of Harold Wilson's election as Labour party leader. "And so, there is the choice for the electorate; on one hand Lord Home - and on the other hand Mr. Harold Wilson. Dull Alec versus Smart Alec" (276). Such direct insults were controversial amongst the more staid viewers of the programme, as well as with the BBC's board of governors, which had, largely due to the influence of the pretty liberal minded

Director-General Hugh Carleton-Green, hitherto kept a fairly wide berth with regard to censoring the show. At the same time, the fact that it was, indeed, equally an insult to both major competing parties was overlooked - the damage wrought was surely equal for both political groups. Conflicts over comic intent, if not necessarily satirical intent, are re-played in Trevor Griffiths' *The Comedians* (written in 1974; first performed in 1975; broadcast as a BBC *Play For Today* in 1979), where the political implications of "getting a laugh" are shown in a stark light. In the context of a class of would-be comedians, learning their trade from a respectable older comic who began his career in the 1930s, racist humour, anti-women jibes, and a reactionary attitude to the nascent multi-cultural Britain are the default choice of most to elicit humour. Others use benign, inoffensive puppetry, autobiographical confession or (in the most markedly experimental approach) abstract irony/mime. The latter mime is a connected with a class based critique of British society; however, the character who carries this out - Gethin (played by Jonathan Pryce) - is the least popular of the group when performing this act to a club audience. Although set at a slightly later point in British history, and with Griffiths' more overtly politicised approach discounting it from being part of the cynic sensibility, it does point to the high stakes and implications, politically, of telling a joke or two.

The Satire Boom, as with the previous "Angry" phenomenon, was a wide cross-cultural, cross-media moment in British culture. Its impact was perceived even at the time; Carpenter quotes a Guardian article marking TW3's cancellation:



Whatever its defects, *TW3* has done more than anything else to foster a healthy irreverence towards persons in authority. Some of this irreverence will surely outlive the craze - and may be the healthier for no longer being modish (281). Although David Frost referred to them in retrospect as “the Exasperated Young Men” (Carpenter 214), there was certainly more to connect the two cultural events than to separate them. Frost himself had satire to thank for launching his career as a T.V interviewer/witty raconteur, whilst others had the boom act as a spring-board into more traditional high-cultural spheres (e.g Jonathan Miller, Alan Bennett). Peter Cook developed into a Hollywood star, albeit briefly; Dudley Moore did the same, but somewhat more successfully and at a more sustained level. Cook, as hitherto stated, focused other satirical/absurdist energies into his role as owner of and writer for *Private Eye*, with his influence extending, most famously, into the more willfully surreal and zany (and less satirical) late 1960s comedy of the Monty Python team.

In terms of the building up of a star persona, the self-promotion and the star power of one David Frost is probably the most striking example – one of the few television satirists to come from a lower middle class background, and one of the few also who wasn’t much of a writer. Though he acted as the anchorman for *TW3*, he wrote little of the content himself. Interestingly, his tendency towards self-promotion prompted some fairly decidedly angry reactions, along with a slight recognition of part of his appeal:

There was something ungentelemanly about a man who was so obviously on the make. His astonishing industry ran counter to the spirit of public-school

amateurism which characterized *Beyond The Fringe* and *Private Eye*. At the same time there was a strange charm about his barefaced ambition which was somehow endearing. (Carpenter quoting Richard Ingrams, 249)

Opportunities for a cross-class, cross-cultural interaction between people as well as art-forms was attributed, by some, to the binding effect that National Service had on British servicemen, forcing hitherto separated people from sometimes wildly different backgrounds to live and work together in close quarters, creating a “social mix which unsettled class assumptions” (Carpenter 7). Yet it was also “a black farce” (7) “Most of all, best of all, I learned that life is a desperate, terrible, magnificent joke. You can distinguish ex-National Servicemen by this sense.” (8, quoting painter and performance artist Jeff Nuttall) It is an interesting point to make, namely that the absurdity of National Service in itself inculcated a sense of the absurd in the men who served their time within it.

There is a degree of continuity between the New Wave cinema and the satire boom, with *Billy Liar* author Keith Waterhouse (co-writing with Willis Hall) worked as script-writers for TW3, writing the aforementioned sketch on trade unions. Also, there is a connection with Charles Lumley’s ending up as a comedy writer in *Hurry On Down*’s conclusion. Yet whilst the New Wave cinema presented working class heroes as such, the satirists generally parodies of all classes, albeit particularly representatives of the British élite. There is also a broader point to be made about the tendency for the comic in comedy (I.e laughter) to be viewed, from a rarefied context, as irrelevant to the form, or, at worst, an active denigration from its *raison d’être*.

Neale and Krutnik analyse this in *Popular Film and Television Comedy* as being derived from Neo-classical and Renaissance ideas on comedy; thus, making people laugh renders a work of art undignified (63). Following on from this, to present a perspective on politics, fuelled by an educated knowledge of contemporary current affairs, in a comic context is a leap forward. Satire is not merely to bring a wry smile to the face, but to cause genuine laughter, thereby giving lie to the idea that to be funny is to delegitimize social comment. *That Was The Week That Was* also used of music as a key component of its weekly routine. The singer-performer Millicent Martin was crucial to the success of *TW3*, in this sense, performing songs which were set to topical lyrics each week on the show. *Beyond The Fringe's* Dudley Moore was a talented classical and jazz pianist, and one of his key motivations for going to the U.S.A with the group was the opportunity to further immerse himself in the home of jazz music.

There is a view that the tendency of popular forms is to become somehow diluted by repetition of the same formula, a wish to maintain success by sticking to “whatever works”, as well as perhaps a parallel tendency to rest on one’s laurels after garnering huge popular and critical acclaim. Dennis Potter, his own work to be discussed slightly later in this chapter, criticised what he felt was the encroaching laziness of *TW3* in its second series:

A year ago on this page I welcomed the first show with a joyful but incredulous stupefaction. On Saturday, of course, the shock was gone. A bomb explodes only once...this time there was an almost cosy air of self-congratulation

between performers and viewers as the predictable swipe about Marples [Minister of Transport] tumbled hard upon a predictable snigger about Macmillan... (quoted in Carpenter 272)

Potter's reference to the series' beginning like a bomb is interesting: implying that, rather than necessarily encouraging a plethora of similar imitators in its wake, it was simply an event which needed to happen at a given point, and, having done its "damage" as it were, it would never be repeated. This is similar to the explosion of punk rock music later in British culture, as though its effects were felt years afterwards, it was less in the sense of creating a formula or style to be repeated, but rather as a galvanising gesture towards challenging conventional rules, in its case in the popular music world. However, some did question the functionality of television to even facilitate satire adequately. The medium, apparently, cheapened the very practice of satire; a Daily Telegraph leader on the programme/subject wrote:

Satire eludes, nay it thrives on censorship. Its best subjects are pompousness, hypocrisy and abuse of power. But in a country such as Britain, tolerant to the point of faineance, it may sometimes be easy to overdo the gibe at authority. And whereas the real satirist, who plays to a keenly critical audience, is kept on his mettle by their reactions, the TV performer, divided from them by the screen, is in danger of lapses of taste. The public may either squirm in their seats, or switch to another channel. (Carpenter 235)

Oddly, the fact of censorship, which arguably hastened the end of *TW3*, is here viewed as something ennobling. Television, of course, in this case, had its own censorial remit within the power structure of the BBC's governance. The Telegraph's opinion piece here seems to regard a more obscure, stage-bound satire, with a certain "keenly critical" (a byword for university educated perhaps?) impulse; thus, satire should be for a minority culture. The reference to the demeaning effects of "lapses in taste" further reinforces the idea that a meek, unfunny and safe "satire" is to be preferred to one which might be somewhat offensive or even acerbic in tone. It is a measure of *TW3*'s quality and impact that it attained such popularity in the face of such ideas on the role of satire.

### **Dennis Potter and *The Nigel Barton Plays***

Dennis Potter, unlike many loosely affiliated with the satire boom (he acted as a writer for some sketches), was actually directly engaged with politics, standing unsuccessfully for election in 1964 for the Labour party. As with most of his creative work, Potter drew upon this experience in a fictional context in his pair of television plays from 1965, known together as *The Nigel Barton Plays*. *Stand Up Nigel Barton* was an account of the eponymous hero's childhood on the border between England and Wales, and later assimilation into a meritocratic middle class station in life, attaining scholarships to both grammar school and Oxford. This coincides with his

disconnection from his working class upbringing, exemplified by the character of his coal mining father. Key to the appeal of this play is the sense of isolation and uniqueness felt by the hero - Nigel is portrayed as more intelligent and sensitive than his rather more crass peers, and is bullied for it. His sense of dislocation from the "crowd" is further emphasised after his ascent into the higher class of academic institutions exemplified by the grammar school and Oxford. Yet the central character is still an outsider. Similarly to the way in which Charles Lumley feels, stranded in an alien seeming working-class pub in *Hurry On Down*, Barton is at once too marked by his own class background to be truly accepted at Oxford, but too refined and aloof-seeming to be thoroughly embraced at home. According to Richard Hoggart, the reaction to those who seemed to be getting about their station was one of the most negative in working class communities: "Neither [i.e the 'toff' or the 'gentleman'] inspires a feeling as strong as that aroused by the person who is putting on posh airs because he thinks they are better than working-class airs" (*The Uses Of Literacy* 86). In the course of the play, Barton participates in a documentary about the concept of Class in Britain at the present time (modelled on a similar documentary that Potter himself participated in). His family watch from their home in the Forest of Dean, seemingly embarrassed and shocked at the candour with which their son is describing his feelings of being disenfranchised from his cultural background. However, this further ties in with the concept of the cynic sensibility: the disconnection reinforces the uniqueness of the hero, and to some extent liberates him from the ties that bind him to his past.

More explicitly to do with Potter's political experience as an unsuccessful election candidate for the Labour party in 1964, the sequel *Vote Vote Vote For Nigel Barton* presented a slightly older Barton engaging with the messy world of party politics, knocking on doors and learning the ways of buttering up the electorate by his seasoned, cynical election agent Jack Hay. Barton's reaction to this coaxing is reluctant: he feels more inclined to fall back on his actual political principles, as opposed to compromising himself to make himself appear more superficially appealing. His final public political speech of his campaign is a lengthy rant, exorcising his embittered feelings about the process that he's found himself in. In essence, any belief that Barton has in the game of party politics has been eroded; his rant is effectively the signal of his firm withdrawal from direct engagement. In terms of formal experimentation, the usage of the medium of television with innovation was a key characteristic of *The Nigel Barton Plays*. Flashbacks feature prominently in *Stand Up Nigel Barton*, and his usage of fully grown actors to play the roles of school children in the play also added a sense of eerie pathos to its form, parallel to the fact of Potter's own personal back-story informing the work. In *Vote Vote Vote For Nigel Barton*, Potter's experience of writing for the popular press, as well as for *TW3*, provides a sense of engagement with the idiocies of both actors in the political process, and the sometimes blinkered, reactionary tendencies of the voters Barton tries to canvass (one is, for instance, preoccupied to do about "all the blacks"). In later work by Potter, more formal innovation in the television drama form coincides with a key role played by his personally curated soundtrack, notably in *The Singing Detective*

(1986), partly autobiographical, part inspired by hardboiled noir fiction and early jazz. At this point, in his first forays into television plays, there is less of this extensive ambition in style, although there is decidedly less class politics or party politics in evidence either. Potter's impact is certainly significant, all the same, in contributing to the advance of the possibilities of the TV format. His work stands in opposition to a casual dismissal of television, as outlined by the historian Jack Williams. After the 1950s, Williams writes:

viewers were scorned as 'couch potatoes'. Such criticism of television viewing may have reflected a snobbish assumption that what was popular could have little merit, that what had mass appeal was culturally degenerate. Linked with this may have been suspicions stemming from the Protestant work ethic that activity is morally superior to passivity (32).

Alan Sinfield in *Literature, Politics and Culture In Postwar Britain* also indicates, more broadly, the weakening of dominant 1950s values in Britain as suggested by the rise of televisual critique:

These were often frivolous, but they were exuberant and irreverent, and indicated that there was a constituency for change. *That Was The Week That Was*, in a sketch looking back over the year 1962, summed it up as 'a year in which principles went by the board. A year of incompetence. A year of mendacity. A year of lying'. Such treatment marked a decisive decline in the respect accorded the political system (247).



As the political system was in the middle of a stale centrist consensus, this “decline in respect” seems a more positive thing. Yet in the realm of satire, the critique of Britain as it was in the early 1960s seemed firmly in the hands of a sort of an elite of sorts, reflecting the general public school and university gleaned prestige of its core practitioners. Underlining the disillusionment with mainstream politics is Dennis Potter’s previously quoted derision of the respective electioneering efforts of both Macmillan and Gaitskell, as well as his treatment of the frustrations inherent in an idealistic young intellectual attempting to enter the political class. The decline of deference, as discussed largely in relation to the satire explosion, was precipitating change in British society at this point, and, in the context of Potter’s early work, giving a voice to a discontented, ambitious but somehow alienated lower-middle class, as opposed to the working class based narratives dealt with in British New Wave cinema.

### **Alternative Comedy and *The Young Ones***

Punk and post-punk approaches were not simply confined to the realm of the popular music world. Aspects of the ideologies of both forms transferred into other aspects of popular culture. In this section, I wish to firstly look at the rise of “alternative comedy”, and then – more extensively - at rise of the “post-punk” television comedy series *The Young Ones* (1982-1984) along with this. There are some interesting crossovers between the 1960s comedic work hitherto discussed and its

early 1980s relation. They both share elements of the cynic sensibility, particularly in societal critique, yet shying away from more direct political engagement/consciousness (save Alexei Sayle). Both were highly popular cultural phenomena, launching myriad careers in entertainment and beyond, as well as incorporating pop music (of different genres) as an integral part of their appeal. Indeed, in the case of *The Young Ones*, this was a partially a ploy by which to secure extra programme funding - if they featured bands on each episode, their work would fall under the more lucrative remit of "BBC entertainment" as opposed to comedy. Finally, they both embraced elements of the bohemian, romantic ethos, presenting a youthful, collegiate clique gleefully satirising "normality".

Peter Rosengard's Soho based Comedy Store nightclub – set up in 1978 after being inspired by an exposure to American stand-up comedy on holiday in Los Angeles – is commonly considered as the first alternative comedy venue. Rosengard himself saw the Comedy Store as a successor of sorts to Peter Cook's establishment club. Unlike the establishment club, however, Rosengard's account of the audience suggests a more broad-based appeal:

(They were) young, early twenties to early thirties, and from all walks of life – students to dockers, lords to dustmen. Everybody had to queue, even if they were celebrities who thought they should just walk to the front (9).

The proprietor also felt a conscious philosophical alignment with punk rock culture:

Within a few months of opening the Comedy Store I'd felt that we were doing for comedy what the Sex Pistols had done for rock 'n' roll. Now nearly ten years later I think that perhaps for six months in 1980 it was true (12).

The Store also gave a start to the comedy career of Alexei Sayle, who had begun performing as part of left-wing theatre groups (*Didn't You Kill My Mother-In Law?* 20), and – later – the core cast of *The Young Ones* (Rik Mayall, Adrian Edmondson, Nigel Planer). These comic actors/comedians then set up the The Comic Strip – mainly under the stewardship of Peter Richardson – and, then, two one-off episodes of a made for TV version of their Comic Strip act, produced by (*Young Ones* producer) Paul Jackson, entitled *Boom, Boom, Out Go The Lights* in 1980 and 1981, respectively.

The reasons for seeking to break away from the 1970s were hit upon by one of Sayle's political theatre contemporaries Jim Barclay, who latterly became a Comedy Store regular (as a self-parodying Marxist-Leninist comic), and had a cameo appearance in *The Young Ones* as an odious, racist policeman. After working for a number of years in youth theatre, Barclay joined the John McGrath established left-wing 7-84 theatre company, named after the fact that 7% of the population at that time owned 84% of the country's wealth at that point:

This was changed by the alternative comedians to mean that 7 per cent of the theatre companies get 84 per cent of the Arts Council grants. In fact 7-84 don't get any at all, now. I played the giant in a thing called *The Trembling Giant* by John McGrath, which was the story of capitalism from the medieval merchants

to what was then Jim Callaghan and the 'social contract' thing. It was a very send-uppable play, full of mid-seventies political zeal, but not completely thought through. It had all the faults of political theatre of the period, and I thought, I can't go on doing this – there must be a more honest, less patronizing way of talking to people and getting ideas across (27).

Disillusionment with (perhaps overly worthy) traditional anti-establishment political gestures clearly motivated Barclay. Yet there was not necessarily so much of a break between Alternative Comedy and the strategies advocated by 7-84. John McGrath himself wrote in *A Good Night Out* of the integral nature of comedy in relation to constructing a critical, working class “counter-theatre”:

Working-class audiences like laughs; middle-class audiences in the theatre tend to think laughter makes the play less serious. On comedy working-class audiences are rather more sophisticated. Many working-class people spend a lot of their lives making jokes about themselves and their bosses and their world as it changes. So the jokes that a working-class audience likes have to be good ones, not old ones; they require a higher level of comic skill. Comedy has to be sharper, more perceptive, and more deeply related to their lives (54-55).

In this context, high and low prejudices and clichés are inverted – where laughter was once considered inappropriate or embarrassing, it is instead held up as an example of a heightened sophistication, awareness and sensibility. Jokes are also relayed as a key coping mechanism in the face of social change, particularly for an insecure precariat.

The intention to reach a broad (perhaps *essentialised*) working-class audience was not reached in a theatrical context; arguably, something approaching this *was* achieved the realm of stand-up. Thus, Alexei Sayle identified the niche appeal of the form of early alternative comedy to a disenfranchised, subcultural audience base. In a less benignly written account of the crossover potential of stand-up compared to Rosengard's, Alexei Sayle reminisced about a gig in Essex:

I got a whole front row in Southend – cross of St George and swastikas on their heads...I didn't tone down anything that I said. I said afterwards, 'You're all fucking Nazis'...they said 'Yes'. Ordinary theatre doesn't speak to them, it doesn't have anything to offer...Because I understand about youth tribes and actually do look like a skinhead they could see I was saying something they might conceivably find interesting – and funny (50).

Stepping out of the traditional confines of high culture allowed Sayle to communicate with a distinctively marginalised audience. Like Barclay, he sought to engage with – and not patronise – the viewer/listener, doing so from a self-consciously class oriented perspective:

By the time he came to tour these larger venues he had adopted a skinhead haircut, and he identifies himself quite firmly with the working class – an expression which Sayle uses in the scientific sense, as Marx did: 'Those people who work for a living and have surplus value extracted from them – as opposed to those people who own their own means of production, who are

petit bourgeois. It's a term which refers to the mass of humanity in Britain, who are sorely under-represented in any fields except pop music and football. They're certainly under-represented in comedy – we live in a society where everything is done to stop the working class doing anything the least bit interesting (ibid).

Alexei Sayle's approach to causing offence in the 1980s was nuanced. Whilst not shying away from debating the (casual) racist prejudices of some audience members, Sayle also opposed the political correctness which was seen to be taken as a given. Alternative comedy, as he saw it, *could* be offensive, so long as this offensiveness did not further the oppression felt by marginalised groups:

The important thing about racism is oppression – I won't do stuff about the Irish or women or blacks or Pakistanis because they are oppressed, and I don't want to make that oppression any greater. I think that in many ways *we* are oppressed by the Japanese, and therefore I would be perfectly happy to do stuff about the Japanese. People don't really think it through, they just babble this thing about 'non-sexist, non-racist' (49).

The Enterprise Allowance Scheme – a Thatcherite plan designed to, effectively, manipulate the nation's unemployment figures – was a facilitator of much comedic creativity also. Introduced nationwide in 1983, it allowed artists, comedians, musicians et al to become self-employed 'entrepreneurs', and thereby supplement their dole payments with an extra £40 per week. Stewart Lee, for one, has spoken of

the significance of this artist's role for giving time to cultural workers to develop their respective crafts. In contrast to this freedom of expression allowed by comedy clubs, and the support for individuality which the Enterprise Allowance Scheme provided, having your work televised brought with it major compromise and homogenisation. According to Alexei Sayle, "it's an inevitable process – if something edgy comes up, it's assimilated as quickly as possible" (*Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law?* 275). And, in a comment which could be seen to be aimed at Ben Elton, stating that "a lot of these supposedly 'edgy' performers very much want to be establishment stars...waving the red flag to defeat the red flag" (ibid). Arguably this disingenuousness is parodied by Rik Mayall's character in *The Young Ones*, a pseudo-radical who harbours more deep seated conservative tendencies. This sense of disillusionment with Elton's subsequent career moves was powerful. Stewart Lee pithily encapsulates this antipathy:

If you're over thirty-five, you'll remember before Alternative Comedy, when you'd watch comedians, and it had no kind of relevance to you...and then *The Young Ones* came along, and all that, with Ben Elton, and you thought, 'At last, something for us.' Then, of course, over the years, Ben Elton's changed. He's worked with Queen, who were one of the British bands that broke the, er, cultural embargo on South Africa under apartheid. He's worked with Andrew Lloyd Webber, who's worse than that...And a song that they co-wrote was performed at the inauguration of George Bush. And when questioned about it, Ben Elton said he didn't see it was so much as a celebration of George Bush as a celebration of the President of the United States of America. But of course,

they're the same thing. That's why that argument doesn't work (*How I Escaped My Certain Fate* 98-99).

Years later, this tendency in itself was satirised in by the aforementioned Stewart Lee and his erstwhile comedy partner Richard Herring in their sketch series *This Morning With Richard Not Judy* (1997-98). In a recurring segment entitled 'Angus Deayton's Authorised History of Alternative Comedy', sundry fictional “experimental” left-wing comics reminisce about their past exploits as 'radical' comics, before settling in to centre-ground politics in middle age. In a brilliant addition, each fictional comedian is shown sipping from an SDP (Social Democratic Party) mug whilst holding court about their glory days in the early 1980s.

Jeremy Hardy – now a mainstay of BBC Radio 4 comedy panel programs as a kind of token lefty – came of age in the alternative comedy scene of the 1980s, and comments here on the complicated, neither left nor right politics within the Comedy Store scene:

The audience might like me as well, but they would be quite happy to see Jim Davidson and Bernard Manning. You get quite a lot of extremely bigoted and reactionary people at the Comedy Store – and the abuse that women attract is quite horrifying. There's a whole male feeling which takes over, which I'd only really experienced when I went to see Roy Chubby Brown [not at the Comedy Store] and *there was a ninety per cent male audience absolutely baying to hear*



*the word 'cunt' said repeatedly. There's that element at the Comedy Store. (276 – my italics)*

The invocation of the spectre of Brown in relation to the supposed haven of Alternative Comedy is interesting, and points to the residual power of older, perhaps more crude forms of comedic expression. Hardy's last line here is instructive. Similar in some respects to how current comedy-goers might view someone like the relentlessly foul-mouthed, self-consciously offensive and abrasive Jerry Sadowitz, there was not necessarily any inherent political message in hearing a vituperative man swear for an hour or so. Whatever about the personal politics – and the rise of female and gay comics pointed to this (see Wagg in 'Everything else is propaganda' 333) – alternative did not necessarily mean oppositional. As Wagg perceptively sums up: "Laughing at a joke, perceived by its teller to be left wing, was not necessarily itself a left wing gesture, any more than, say, buying William Morris wallpaper was" (ibid 331).

However, there are many elements to *The Young Ones* which are uniquely of their time. Their crossover between cultural forms - live musical performance, elements of stand-up, and the conventional sitcom all mixed together - gave the show a distinctly (post)modern element. Additionally, the show was heavily infused with the stamp of counter-cultural influence - three of the four central characters are easily identifiable stereotypes (a heavy metal fan, a punk/post-punk fan and a hippy), whilst the most unfashionable and antiquated Mike fills out the gang as a sort of parody of an outmoded, unfunny older generation. In terms of background, the actors and writers

being *The Young Ones* marked a break with tradition - most of them were not privately educated, and some went to university in “the North”. Its politics, whilst apolitical like their *Beyond The Fringe* predecessors, were more inclined towards the nihilistic non-voter, rather than the floating voter. And, of course, marking an increased comfort with the medium of television, formally *The Young Ones* was both innovative and accessible, integrating non-sequitur parodies within their plots, strange subliminal messages, as well as stand-up bits, (bad) poetry and basic puppeteering. Like punk, the series managed to be both simultaneously intellectually complicated, yet dumb. The sense of possibilities, delved into for just two scattershot series on BBC, resonated with the post-punk vanguard’s desire to “rip it up and start again.”

One college drop-out, a non university educated actor and two University of Manchester alumni made up the core cast of *The Young Ones*, and, though not necessarily complete outsiders, it seems fitting that their fictional alma mater is “Scumbag College” in London. Rather than present university life as a rarefied world of louche intellectualising, ivory towers and punting down the river Cam, the four central characters are rarely shown actually working for their degrees. They baulk at the idea that Neil proposes that “they actually go into college” one day, even though the alternative is deathly boredom at home. There are no halls here; rather, they live in a squalid, run down house in North London, owned by a maniacal, interfering Eastern European landlord. References are made to each characters’ programme of study, yet they seem to be purely chosen to further their comic nature - the ultra-

violent and unstable Vyvyan<sup>1</sup> is a Medical student, superficially “lefty” Rik is a Sociology student, hippy stereotype Neil is doing a degree in Peace Studies, whilst mature student Mike is seemingly only in higher education because of blackmailing the Chancellor with compromising photographs. Their (seemingly non-existent) intellectual endeavours serve only to underline their caricatured status - a sociopathic punk training to be a doctor on the one extreme, a posh boy claiming to be a revolutionary poet, obsessed with Marx and Lenin on the other. But there is an intriguing subtext to this, signifying that, on the one hand, perhaps many students end up training in something which is completely absurd, taking into account the people they are. On the other hand, it seems to state rather more explicitly that university education is not necessarily about learning, but a social club of sorts.

Perhaps the greatest critique of the university system is in the opening episode of series two, entitled ‘Bambi’. In it, Scumbag College come up against “Footlights College Oxbridge”, and their team comprised of three notable, real-life Oxbridge graduates - “Lord Snot” (played by Stephen Fry), “Lord Monty” (played by Hugh Laurie), and “Miss Money Sterling” (played by Emma Thompson). Their number was completed by “Mr Kendal Mintcake”, portrayed by *Young Ones* writer Ben Elton. The fictional edition of University Challenge also suggested the opposition felt by *Young Ones* writer to precursors of alternative comedy such as *Not The Nine O’Clock News*. Rik Mayall:

We were very anti *Not The Nine O’Clock News* – we reckoned that we were the best because we were doing cabaret and not revue. Revue was a dirty word,

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1 Vyvyan's name is intentionally misspelled in the scripts/credits of the series

and so was Oxbridge, we had a down on the Pythons – although we secretly all thought that the Pythons were great, and half of us were redbrick and university anyway. Also the fact that everyone in the BBC seemed to be Oxbridge (95).

The episode - which serves in general as an excellent parody of the University Challenge show itself - includes sharp contrasts between the non-elite and elite university system. Scumbag College's team travel by train, which is portrayed as money-grubbing (upon returning from the dining car, Rik is given a cup, which ostensibly should contain some hot beverage; the dialogue runs - Rik: "five pounds for an empty paper cup"? Vyvyan: "Well, it had sugar in it!") and literally subject to absurd hold-ups (the train is held up by Mexican bandits, causing a huge delay). They prepare for the quiz by studying Rik's old O-level History notes, as well as Vyvyan's "The Daily Mirror Book Of Facts - Did You Know?", which contains ample answers to questions such as "who is the world's biggest bottom burp?" and "what is the world record for stuffing marshmallows up one single nostril?". The Footlight's College team's progress to BBC studios is rather more luxurious. They travel by chauffeur driven car, and Elton's character speaks of his happiness that his "daddy bought him the Socialist Workers' Party" for his birthday. Upon arrival for the show, they are supported by an entourage chanting "ra, ra, ra, we're going to smash the oiks"; Scumbag are supported by Vyvyan's foul-mouthed Glaswegian hamster Special Patrol Group, named as an ironic reference to a branch of the London Metropolitan Police notorious for using heavy-handed, violent measures against protesters, including the murder of one Blair

Peach in 1979. The show plays out initially as a reinforcement of the class superiority of the Footlights team - they seem to have an uncanny ability to preempt the quiz-master's questions (Bambi: "What was the name of..." [Lord Snot buzzes in] Lord Snot: "Battle of Bannockburn!" Bambi: "Yes, well that's very well anticipated there...")

They are also seemingly personal friends with him (Bambi: "Well that's not the answer I have on my card, but I knew your father, so 10 points to Footlights". Miss Money-Sterling: "Daddy sends hugs!"). The only way that this can be subverted by the subordinate college is to use absurdist ultra-violence (Vyvyan uses a grenade to eliminate the Footlights team) and cheating (Rik tampers with the question cards to replace the originals with trivia questions gleaned from the aforementioned Daily Mirror book). Whilst the action is clearly infused with a considerable dose of daftness and absurdity, there are some serious points in the subtext. The class based élite as represented by Lord Snot and company is destined to triumph (as host Bambi states prior to the quiz, "the posh kids win, they always do"). Yet the dissent and extreme reaction demonstrated by their opponents is clearly where the sympathies of the audience lie. Scumbag College's sincerity - even if they are sincerely ignorant - is far more endearing than the inherited privilege of the ruling class caricatures. There is also a 'subcultural capital' evident in their team. Sarah Thornton identifies the importance of this term in opposition to more traditionally legitimated forms of high cultural capital:

Just as cultural capital is personified in 'good' manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the

know', using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles (11-12).

By contrast to the products of Oxbridge, youth cultures are at least represented to some degree by the young ones - albeit in very broad strokes. The idea that there is something within 'authentic' youth culture which is ineffably 'cool', completely outside of staid normal, conformity, can be seen in the form of the 'yoof' t.v parody programme "Nozin' Aroun'", featured in episode 1 of series 1. The commodification of youth culture as employed by mainstream media is critiqued here; whilst Rik is initially naively enthusiastic about the prospect of a programme catered towards "young adults", he ends up furiously kicking in the television screen in rage at its inanity. The programme features trendily dressed but seemingly very "square" or "stiff" youthful presenters who seem preoccupied, above all else, with coming across as enthusiastic and energetic. Parts of the show include interviews with "the kids on the street" seem entirely scripted, and the absurd/anarchic elements of the protagonists of The Young Ones' existence are in stark contrast. Despite obvious exaggerations, the sense of the rawness or ugliness of their lives appears more real than the sanitised and over-produced media version. The squalor of their flat also feeds into this - it is shown covered in filth, and in one episode ('Interesting'), a gigantic divinely provided sandwich (!) is utilised as a substitute for a couch.

In a further gesture towards the importance of cool in a youth cultural context, one of the four core characters seems a parody of an older kind of humour and mindset. "Mike The Cool Person" is the one mature student of the group, and though he self-

identifies as cool/with it, he is essentially an old school comic, out of touch with the surrealism/aggression of the other characters. Obsessed with his self-image, he considers himself (wrongly) as being a ladies' man, and far funnier than his housemates. His humour as such is based around one liners (e.g. "There's no avoiding this, and I'm not talking about my chopper") and an affected sense of smoothness; there is an arrogance and complacency in his character which isn't undercut by overt ineptitude or self-deprecation like the others. In a sense, his presence in the show is to underline the newness of *The Young Ones* as a whole, by presenting an anachronistic older, residual comic persona. Again, the Bohemian connotations of the Young Ones is emphasis when, in the episode 'Boring', hell is portrayed as a torture chamber staffed by red-painted demons, mercilessly playing Barry Manilow records on full volume to the damned - Manilow being an easy listening, MOR performer taken as being synonymous with mawkish and inane pop.

The episode parodying University Challenge discussed in the previous section clearly has somewhat of a political element, but though the Scumbag College team perhaps gets more sympathy than the ruling class caricatures from the audience, they are hardly collectively a noble representation of an oppositional class. Their rebelliousness and anarchic behaviour in the face of "the establishment" shows a certain kind of "spirit", but Scumbag College are not working class heroes by any means. In 'Oil', their so-called "People's Charter" (referencing the early 19th century voting reform group the Chartists) is only invoked when questions of who has the responsibility of taking clothes to the laundrette ("I thought we were supposed to take

everyone's washing when we go to the laundrette! What about the People's Charter we drew up? [Opens a small book] Right, laundry.") One of the few more pointed references - made in the rather scattershot annual *Bachelor Boys*, there is a joke made in reference to U.S President Ronald Reagan's mildly sanctioned imperialist incursion into Nicaragua in 1984 (10).

In terms of the political comment (or even tentative "engagement") in *The Young Ones* occurs through the characters of Rik and Alexei Sayle particularly. With Rik in particular, his interest in politics is that of a dilettante, eager to appear revolutionary and to further his self-image as "the people's poet" (he composes childish verse with vague anti-establishment messages, which he sees as appealing primarily to "the kids"). Alexei Sayle, on the other hand, generally articulates a left-leaning perspective in his comedic monologues in the series, albeit with a firm sense of absurdity - in 'Bambi', part of his speech is devoted to attributing the ill health of British industry to the tendency of upper-class, Oxbridge/public school educated management to be interested in "perverse sexual practices....they're too busy slamming each other's dicks in the doors (to do a good job)." Sayle's contributions as a monologue writer no doubt had roots in his stand-up comedy routines prior to the show, he "made no attempt to ingratiate himself with his audience", referring to his own tendency to "use comedy to *make* trouble" (*A Great Big Silly Grin* 325). In the episode 'Cash', Sayle plays the role of the head of a local police force who is a Benito Mussolini obsessive. In a performance both ridiculously exaggerated and making an oblique point about the strong armed tactics of the police in general, the show seems to articulate a rebellious



dissent against “the system” as such, whilst also being sufficiently daft in tone to simultaneously avoid being pigeon-holed as straightforward political comedy. His turn as a Mussolini-clone ends with an absurd song, delivered in the style of a cheesy Saturday night television entertainer:

Whenever people bother me  
 When they shout and raise their voices  
 I don't let it get me down  
 I just make some stupid noises!

I go...HUH HUH HUH HUH NI NI NI NI YA YA YA [etc.]

When the boss is giving you the sack  
 'Cause you've lost all his invoices  
 Don't drink a bottle of sulphuric acid  
 Relax, make stupid noises!

Just go... [more stupid noises as Sayle dances around]

In the episode ‘Oil’, their student house finds itself in the grips of a dictatorial junta, spearheaded by Mike (as ‘El Presidenté’) and Vyvyan as his bodyguard. In response to this, Rik organises a benefit concert to free the oppressed workers of the house, which in this case is only the downtrodden Neil. In an absurd twist, Rik demands that Neil

pay money to attend his own benefit gig; the idea that a benefit concert - in this case, in a ridiculously small setting - could have genuinely revolutionary effects is portrayed as being daft. The fact that the headline act (with their singer, portrayed by Sayle, uttering the immortal line: "sod the revolution, where's my two hundred quid?") of this concert plays a song promoting the unifying potential of Doctor Marten boots (more on this in the next section).

Rik's apparently superficial attachment to Marx and Lenin, gleaned via his sociology degree, is parodied throughout the series. He is shown at the beginning of 'Cash' asleep with a copy of the collected works of Marx opened on his lap, significantly on the first page. Rather than simply present a louche and detached approach towards politics, *The Young Ones*, through Rik's character, confronts the tendencies of people (though perhaps particularly a certain breed of student) to assume an interest in trendy left wing politics, before readily dumping their principles upon leaving university. Easy references by Rik to the nefarious Margaret Thatcher are frequently made (including a memorable "I hope you're satisfied Thatcher!", directed by Rik to the camera, when the group are running out of money), but these are never really backed up by any genuine political comment or bite about her politics. In fact, Rik is depicted as quite conservative and reactionary - in the episode 'Bomb':

I mean, it's no wonder the country is in such a state. I don't know why they don't just be honest and hand the whole place over to Oxfam. Nothing but scroungers and horrid old people and work-shy layabouts all wandering

around clutching their Giros and trying to get something for nothing. Oh yes, the Post Office seems to be very good at handing out other people's money, doesn't it? No wonder my grant's so small. I suppose next thing there will be rows and rows of little Biafran children, all queuing up for a bowl of millet before they become Communists.

His rant, in response to a meek old person agreeing with Rik's criticism of a queue that's progressing too slowly, is full of contradictions, and in its references to "scroungers" and "work-shy" layabouts seems partly derived from a *Daily Mail* editorial page. He doesn't seem to recognise the irony of a grant recipient student complaining about the concept of "handing out other people's money" either.

*The Young Ones*, due to its classification by the BBC under its "entertainment" remit, featured bands "performing" live on every episode. The scare quotes here are due to the fact that most of the bands were lip-syncing along to studio versions of their songs, albeit with nods to verisimilitude such as microphones, amplifier stacks, seemingly impassioned vocalising and solos. The connection between the comedy and musical performances has obvious antecedents in the Satire Boom and *That Was The Week That Was*, as well as in the 'Alternative Cabaret' scene. Alternative Cabaret spread in the U.K (particularly in London) after the beginnings of Alternative Comedy, bringing more of a focus on comic musical performance rather than stand-up routines. The variation of bands included on the show varied enormously, though they could be *very* broadly categorised as signifying a kind of alternative (or at least quirky) pop culture. The placement of each band's performance in the running order

of the show is generally round about the midpoint of the programme, and is generally - but not always - set in one of the rooms of their student house. Dexy's Midnight Runners, dressed in their full "celtic soul brothers" regalia, play a cover of Van Morrison's 'Jackie Wilson Said'. Madness' hymn to the purchasing of condoms - 'House Of Fun' - is delivered in the absurdly named local pub "The Kebab and Calculator". Pioneering, but not particularly trendy, punk band The Damned are included in the episode 'Nasty', performing a song appropriately entitled 'Video Nasty'. AmaZulu - a ska-pop crossover group - as well as jazz-pop band Rip Rig and Panic also featured. And seminal heavy metal band Motorhead played 'Ace Of Spades' in the gang's sitting room, soundtracking their rushed jaunt to the train station in advance of a mooted University Challenge appearance.

There was one musical appearance which was borne solely out of the comedy scene and not that of popular music. Cast-member Alexei Sayle, in the second episode of series 1 ('Oil'), performs a benefit concert, organised by Rik in their front room. His role is that of a political protest singer, advocating the overthrow of the "fascist junta" that has emerged in the house after the discovery of oil in their cellar. After a prolonged "right on" introduction to his song, Sayle's character sings of "the one thing that unites us"; promising some kind of grandiose, rousing political statement, it turns out that "Doctor Marten's Boots" are this beautiful thing. Seemingly taking apart trendy political protest and foreshadowing future epic rock star hubris vis á vis Live Aid etc, the "Doctor Marten's Boots" song is an interesting and absurd comment on the folly of sloganeering politics within song, as well as on the tendency for many

musicians (and artists, generally) to apparently “sell out” by being perceived as cosyng up to the market too much:

It's not class or ideology,  
Color, creed, or roots,  
The only thing that unites us  
Is Dr. Marten's boots.  
  
Dr. Marten's boots of the world  
So that everybody can be free,  
They're classless, matchless, ageless and waterproof  
And retail for only 19 pounds and 99p.  
What should everyone be wearing?  
Those boots with the air-flow soles  
And your boots will have a meeting  
And your boots will take control.  
  
Thanks to Dr. Marten everyone will have warm feet  
Thanks to Dr. Marten they'll be dancing in the street  
No. Don't You Want Me.  
  
OK, Boots. Do your stuff!  
  
Dr. Marten's, Dr. Marten's, Dr. Marten's boots (etc.)

Whilst not necessarily embodying any kind of punk rock bias - by the early 1980s, they would have had to showcase the extremely abrasive and television unfriendly likes of Sham 69, the UK Subs and The Exploited - these choices were true to a polyglot post-punk aesthetic. As highlighted by Simon Reynolds in his history of the period in the U.K and beyond, post-punk represented an opening up of the possibilities and eclecticism in music - see the contrast between a band steeped in American soul, disco and 1960s guitar pop like Orange Juice and the heavy, Krautrock influenced monochrome austerity of Public Image Limited. Thus *The Young Ones* allowed its audience exposure to an array of music which underlined the state of play in British popular music of the time.

Aside from the performance aspects of the show's approach to music - which generally included therein an implicit acknowledgment of the featured group's coolness - there are i) incidental usages of music, and ii) references to other musicians. There is certainly more of the latter than the former. Incidental music in *The Young Ones* varies quite a lot, from the use of Jane Morgan's easy listening 1958 hit 'The Day That The Rains Came' in the episode 'Flood', to the incorporation of the intro to Arthur Brown's 'Fire' in a scene set in hell in 'Boring'. Such reference points move away from the contemporary popular music of the performance parts of the show and point to an interesting combination of modern tastes and nostalgia.

In terms of references in dialogue to other musicians, chief among these is by far Cliff Richard. In the *Young Ones* glossy annual *Bachelor Boys* (and one of the few documents in writing by the players involved in *The Young Ones* from the early

1980s), there is a recurring piece entitled “The History of Pop.” Its tone, as well as its obsequious and absurd reverence towards Cliff Richard, suggests it was written by Rik Mayall in the character of Rik.

The story of pop music is basically the story of Cliff Richard, and vice versa. The two are identical, except, of course, pop music doesn't go out with Sue Barker. From the beginning, Cliff had many imitators, perhaps the best known being the American cabaret artiste Elvis Presley. Elvis modelled his career on Cliff except of course, he didn't go out with Sue Barker. Elvis died in 1977, just one year after Cliff had invented punk rock. His last words were, 'Does anyone have any more hamburgers and drugs?' (22)

In the next paragraph, he goes on to attribute the creation of the blues to a Cliff Richard/Tommy Steele collaboration. As well as representing a staid, unrebelling and uncool side of pop culture, Richard was also of the generation who seemingly could not help *but* be pale imitations of American rock and roll music. Unlike, say Pete Townshend, who Cohn evidently admires a lot, Richard was too old when rock travelled transatlantically to ever assimilate it well:

When *Jailhouse Rock* came out, say, Cliff Richard was sixteen but Pete Townshend was only eleven. It was an important gap - Cliff was already too old to adjust himself and he always sounded like someone speaking in a foreign language, he could only ape Americans. With Townshend, though, that sense of

strain didn't exist - he had pop off by heart, he thought in it instinctively. (Cohn, 195)

Thus, in juxtaposing these two quite different British performers - one seemingly more authentic/artistically worthwhile than the other - we can see how Rik's obsessive devotion to Cliff Richard is even more ridiculous, particularly the fact that his obsession occurs in the context of a fertile contemporary post-punk British musical culture. As well as this - no doubt - the blinkered, white suburban middle-class approach is also being taken apart here.

There are myriad scattershot references to aspects of traditionally conceived high culture within *The Young Ones* - in terms of literature, there are oblique references to Samuel Beckett (the two men on holiday under a single light bulb in 'Oil'); with cinema, there are references to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (the chess game opening sequence in 'Nasty'). This is a perhaps unsurprising intertextuality at work within the show; Adrian Edmondson and Rik Mayall honed their craft studying drama, and both Edmondson and Mayall were consciously influenced by Beckett in their writing. They specifically reference this fact in *Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law?*, as well as in a 1991 interview with Jonathan Ross. Interestingly - Nigel Planer and (the subject of a later chapter) Stephen Poliakoff went to secondary school together, working on plays in tandem. Fellow Comedy Store alumni The Oblivion Boys also in *The Young Ones* in a surreal cut-away sequence as beheaded ghosts carrying their own skulls in the episode 'Cash'; later, these two were to star in a stage version of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (Cook 145).



## Conclusion

Andrew Rosen, in his 2003 social history of post-World War Two British society, identified three main “profound changes” that have occurred in the country post-austerity:

In analyzing the profound changes in British life which took place between 1950 and 2000, three main themes have emerged. First, the unparalleled rise in standards of living made it possible for most Britons to live in ways which would have been far beyond their parents' means fifty years earlier. Second, there was a marked decline in popular support for orthodox institutions such as the police, the monarchy, religion, marriage and the trade unions. Third, British society became far more flexible and diverse than it had been in 1950 (Rosen 169).

In each of these categories – but particularly the second - Satire, Dennis Potter and Alternative Comedy/*The Young Ones* were, respectively, deeply embedded. None of these changes were, of course, inherently positive developments. Flexibility has brought insecurity; cultural diversity has often more benefitted those able to afford the fruits of it best. Consumer capitalism has, likewise, offered a certain limited form of freedom of choice. However, is the decline in reverence for institutions masked their actual power? In a recent piece for the London Review Of Books, Jonathan Coe pieced apart the history of English satire, particularly in relation to its oppositional

status. This lengthy – but incredibly pertinent – final salvo was from a review of *The Wit and Wisdom of Boris Johnson* (the solitary line which explicitly references said book features below):

Anti-establishment comedy was a product of a more naive and deferential age, when to stand on a West End stage and make fun of the prime minister could be seen, briefly, as a radical act. In those days, the laughter of the audience really was something for Macmillan to be afraid of, because it signalled a genuine and profound shift in the public attitude towards him and the whole political class. But Boris Johnson - as Harry Mount's little volume of his aperçus demonstrates - has nothing to fear from public laughter at all. These days, every politician is a laughing-stock, and the laughter which occasionally used to illuminate the dark corners of the political world with dazzling, unexpected shafts of hilarity has become an unthinking reflex on our part, a tired Pavlovian reaction to situations that are too difficult or too depressing to think about clearly. Johnson seems to know this: he seems to know that the laughter that surrounds him is a substitute for thought rather than its conduit, and that puts him at a wonderful advantage. If we are chuckling at him, we are not likely to be thinking too hard about his doggedly neo-liberal and pro-City agenda, let alone doing anything to counter it. With a true genius for taking the temperature of a country that has never been closer to sinking 'sniggering beneath the watery main', Boris Johnson has become his own satirist: safe,

above all, in the knowledge that the best way to make sure the satire aimed at you is gentle and unchallenging is to create it yourself (31).

Satire has become so widespread and over-used in contemporary British comedy that politicians themselves can simply incorporate it into their acts. Johnson's popularity is a reflection of this – an internalised system of stage managing oneself. Actively negative political policies are masked by the apolitical mask of satire. The often cosy, symbiotic relationship between Johnson and the panel of the BBC's *Have I Got News For You*, for instance, functions very neatly for both parties. The former is able to copperfasten a public perception of himself as full of blustering bonhomie, unlike faceless 'career politicians' (leaving aside considerations of his own quite successful career) whilst the latter can take solace in their ability to humourously – but not too scathingly – pick this persona apart, albeit only fleetingly in the context of a half hour programme. And, if the Satire Boom were (in David Frost's phrase) “exasperated young men”, then Ian Hislop are more like the peevish middle-aged.

A considerably less noble enterprise than mild satire was described by comedy agent of long-standing Addison Cresswell, in relation to the Alternative Comedy's support of the Red Wedge campaign to get the Labour Party elected in 1987:

We were out for the Labour Party, but after a while it became irrelevant. We were all getting pissed in the hotel. What a great line-up: Ben Elton, Robbie Coltrane, Harry Enfield, Julian Clary and Arthur Smith compering... There was this political unit full of mad SWP-type people following us around saying,

'We've got to go to the factories from eleven in the morning, and talk to the people!' 'Fuck off! We're all on the razzle tonight!' We never used to go to those political rallies in the morning. We always got hammered. We lost six seats out of seven – it was a fucking distaster! We were losing them votes, but it was good fun. After that, I became more of a capitalist and got on with it (quoted in Wagg 1996 331-332).

The blokey bonhomie described by Cresswell underlines a flippancy suggesting a devout adherence to the hedonistic at the expense of any kind of political engagement. Power is left unquestioned, so long as there's a party to be had. As Wagg perceptively notes:

Routines and reminiscences such as these imply that politics is one thing (the province of mad people, perhaps, and zealots), but that 'real' life is elsewhere; thus, it helped to strengthen public antipathy to that mythical rendition of equal opportunities policy known as 'political correctness'(332).

'Real' life, of course, entails viewing the act of caring about political matters as the preserve of 'zealots'; a wry cynicism is, by contrast, the sensible approach, perhaps combined with a hearty piss-up. This kind of ironic detachment – and moves away from sincerity - becomes the hallmark of the cynic sensibility in the post-1960s period. A way of seeing the world more specificially coloured by irony, albeit in individually different ways, categorises the work of Stephen Poliakoff, the initial explosion of Punk, The Fall and The Smiths. This progression – artistic successes

notwithstanding – has certainly exasperated some. Mark Steel complained of the contemporary tendency towards all-purpose cynicism:

I find most people actually agree with a huge amount of what socialists say, but wouldn't call themselves socialists... The idea of a lot of today's comedy is that everything is rubbish - bosses are rubbish and workers are rubbish, rich people are rubbish and poor people are rubbish. Let's take the piss out everything (quoted by Wagg 330).

This could, indeed, be a comedic manifesto for the cynic sensibility.

## Chapter 6 – *Bed Peace*

Give the huge corpus of work devoted to piecing apart the music, lyrics and cultural significance of The Beatles, critic David Quantick was justified in writing that:

The story is overtold now: even unborn children know, at some deep genetic level, how Paul McCartney met John Lennon at Woolton Fete and showed him some chords...and universities now teach courses on how the respectable band members who were able to mix with royalty became drug-using psychonauts who pushed the barriers of popular music so far back that they collapsed (*Revolution 7*).

Carys Wyn Jones has identified slight currents in popular music academic discourse seemingly devoted to placing The Beatles alongside traditional high cultural practices of yore – for instance, via the *Beatlestudies* series of conferences/books, which sought to apply traditional (classical) musicological methods to the band. Jones points out the niche carved out by such endeavours, and their determined ignorance of other forms of (less widely intellectualised) popular music - “it is easy to image that *Dylan Studies* might be regarded as the next desirable step” (Jones 113). In the aftermath of – amongst other things - cultural phenomena such as The Beatles Anthology television series (with subsequent VHS and DVD releases), the 2009 Mono reissuing of most of their records, and the extensive three hour documentary by Martin Scorsese devoted to their third songwriter, George Harrison (*Living In The Material World*), this

“overtold story” can seemingly still be told, and re-told. And, as this chapter demonstrates, the popular cultural and thematic significance of the band in relation to the cynic sensibility (and, in this context, particularly John Lennon) cannot be ignored. Hysterical articles in Britain as to what Paul Johnson fustily termed “the menace of Beatlism” (195) – which gave being a Beatles fan a slight anti-establishment tinge - did little to inhibit their progress. Fusing as they did a myriad of musical styles, phenomenal popularity, mass media exposure (extending into cinema), and being the only British pop group to truly “conquer” the U.S market (at least, until Mumford & Sons), they are justifiably pored over for their unique popular cultural impact. In the context of my argument, John Lennon represents the articulation of the cynic and its tensions within the band - he is, seemingly, the most inclined to be able to fuse together the bohemian outlook, the cross high/low cultural tendencies and a general apolitical bent that the sensibility embodies. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the band in terms of transcending a rigid conception of high versus low culture is Lennon’s own trajectory from skiffle-influenced member of the pre-Beatles outfit The Quarrymen to an engagement with (and skill for) making avant-garde music. He also represents a direct line between aspects of the British Satire boom, with its sometimes playful and surreal, sometimes caustic wit, and the world of popular music. His forays into the world of literature also pointed to a desire, not only to pay homage to his writerly heroes like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, but a desire to be thought of as an artist across different media - albeit one that was and still is vastly more known for his cultural significance within popular music culture.

The first point that should be made about the bohemian, Romantic element of Lennon is his own view of himself as being part of a kind of tortured artist milieu. In *Lennon Remembers*, taken from interviews conducted in 1970 by the Rolling Stone editor Jann Wenner, he describes his youth in terms that suggest that he, at some level, viewed himself as having possessed some innate quality of creativity from an early age. Wenner's questions are in italics:

*Do you think you're a genius?*

Yes, if there is such a thing as one, I am one.

*When did you first realize that?*

When I was about twelve. I used to think I must be a genius but nobody's noticed. I used to think whether I'm a genius or I'm mad, which is it? (*Lennon Remembers* 64).

Along with this adolescent sense of disconnection from his peers, Lennon also describes in the Wenner interviews a self-conscious identification with Romantic artist antecedents in visual forms; the dubious 'gift' of being a visionary is, apparently, torturous:

If I could be a fisherman I would, you know. If I had the capabilities of being something other than I am, I would. It's no fun being an artist. You know what it's like, writing, it isn't fun, it's torture. I read about Van Gogh, Beethoven, any of them – and I read an article the other day- well, if they'd had psychiatrists we wouldn't have had Gauguin's great pictures. And these fuckin' bastards



there just sucking us to death, that's about all that we can do, is do it like circus animals. I resent being an artist, in that respect, I resent performing for fucking idiots who don't know anything (ibid 11).

*Lennon Remembers* is commonly considered an exemplary cathartic series of interviews, where the artist expressly rejects the media management of his Beatles years and unleashes raw invective so as to appear more real or 'authentic'. Thus, the vituperative statement above seems the result of a retrospective analysis, after having become a large scale cultural icon. Nonetheless, there are various issues here to unpick. Art is “torture”, and inherently painful; this draws Lennon on to referencing Van Gogh and Beethoven. Certainly, inviting comparisons with the particularly tragic pauper's end of Van Gogh, as well as his numerous incarcerations in mental asylums seem a stretch in light of Lennon's rather comfortable pop star existence. However, Lennon's sense of being exploited is palpable - perhaps he is imagining Van Gogh's indignation at how his art has been posthumously appropriated, commodified and fetishised? Primarily, he is fuelled by a sense of the indignity of being ogled at (“do it like circus animals”), and at being misinterpreted or misread (“fucking idiots who don't know anything”). His denunciation here of the trappings of being a successful star is contemptuous in the first instance of the act of performance – something which is, seemingly, inseparable from his art (live or not). More to the point, the blanket identification of a mass, ignorant, passive consumerist crowd as his audience is reminiscent of the simplistic, rote dismissal of popular cultural practices by cynic antecedents like Larkin, Osborne etc. It is also reminiscent of a 19th English

Romantic disdain for more earthy and expressive public discourse. This was analysed by Raymond Williams in relation to Wordsworth as a tendency towards finding it “easier to be respectful and reverent to ‘the People, philosophically characterized’, than to a Public which noisily identifies itself” (*Culture and Society* 51). Ironically, Lennon's extensive commercial suggests that his fans *were* listening to what he had to say, at least to some extent.

In an iconic interview from September 1971 with Dick Cavett, Lennon and Ono present themselves self-consciously as artists - their first meeting is referred to by Ono as one of two artists coming together - and their function is to comment and reflect on the world from a somewhat detached position, perhaps slightly above it. Lennon and Ono's is perhaps a lofty and elitist point of view, but one which is by no means uncommon in parts of the popular music world; quoting the Wenner interviews once more, “creating is a result of pain” (ibid 94). The protest/art statements of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's “bed in” happenings for peace in 1969 connects a louche, Bohemian lifestyle choice in the context of an apparently egalitarian, liberated personal relationship, with a critique of contemporary society. The message - essentially that nothing negative could or would happen in the world if people would just resolutely stay in bed, and the inherent benign, peaceful passivity of this - displays definite political naiveté, but seems more appropriate in the context of a performance art gesture, critiquing the tendencies to reify the Protestant work ethic and the attendant publicity. The widely televised event has roots in a playful, Fluxus

style statement, reflecting to a degree elements of George Maciunas 1963 manifesto for the group:

PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART, Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dillettantes and professionals. (emphases in original)

This democratic impulse is clearly present in Lennon and Ono's piece; whether it can said to be a success, or educative, however, is uncertain. At the same time, this gesture can be (and was indeed) easily ridiculed as the pompous, complacent “commentary” of an incredibly wealthy celebrity couple. Certainly if it weren't for Lennon's immense media profile, the stunt would have garnered far less ire and (indeed) notice.

In certain specific songs from The Beatles era, Lennon, though clearly a wealthy man himself, seems to equate consumption and acquisitiveness with absurdity. Though not a directly angry song as such, ‘Baby You're A Rich Man’ is full of sarcasm at the character of the rich man, suddenly viewed as being “one of the beautiful people” after having chanced upon the Swinging Sixties, possibly purely on the basis of having money. Released as part of the *Magical Mystery Tour* E.P in 1968, the song fuses the quirky, experimental psychedelia (complete with skittering, jumpy bass lines and sped-up monophonic keyboard sounds) of the late 1960s Beatles with a somewhat less philosophical and dreamy lyrical outlook. “You keep all your money in a big brown bag inside a zoo” - whilst being a flip lyric - is a jokey take on the rich's behaviour. Apparently one of the work in progress lyrics was to be directed at former

Beatles manager Brian Epstein - "baby you're a rich fag Jew" (MacDonald 206). Not only would this add a more spiteful and bitter edge to the song, it would have negated some of its general appeal/applicability. It would have also restricted its appeal to those who also hated Brian Epstein, or were simply all-purpose bigots. At any rate, the recorded version as it is seems to take aim at raw acquisitiveness just for the sake of it; as it is a pop song, it also helps that it has some verses, and a hummable, melodic chorus.

Much has been made of the apparent drug-laden nature of the song from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* 'Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds', given that the first letter of the nouns in the title can spell out LSD. A reference always maintained by Lennon to have been an unconscious one (if made at all), a perhaps more clear cut example of a song dealing with the subject of illicit drugs is 'Dr. Robert' from 1966's *Revolver*. "Take a drink from his special cup - Dr. Robert"; "He's a man you must believe, helping everyone in need - no one can succeed like Dr. Robert"; "Well, well, well, you're feeling fine, well well well he'll make you...". Apparently based upon a New York city doctor frequented by well-to-dos in the celebrity world, 'Dr. Robert' seems like a pretty carefree evocation of a blissed-out drug fuelled existence, without much qualms for considering the mental or bodily side effects. Although not necessarily advocating any illegal drugs, Lennon seems to be coming out firmly as an advocate of the potential benefits of drugs generally - certainly a transgressive gesture within a pop record, but perhaps reflecting and foreshadowing the changes which were to come in British society in the late 1960s.

Although partly dismissed by Ian MacDonald as a mere genre exercise in aping the British blues rock movement, exemplified by Clapton, John Mayall et al (much the same way that 'Helter Skelter' is viewed by the same writer as pure heavy metal pastiche), 'Yer Blues', from the White Album, is an interesting example of the tension between Lennon's conception of himself as a tortured artist, coinciding with a rather reflexive, self-deprecating irony. The entire lyric - essentially Lennon wailing "I'm so lonely/wanna die", with key lines including "feel so suicidal/even hate my rock and roll" - is a screamed catharsis, backed by sludgy, heavy blues riffing. The scare quotes around the title, of course, imply some sort of distancing, and the title itself. Similarly to George Harrison's 'Only A Northern Song', this labelling lends itself to interpreting the song as a throwaway. However, the grain of Lennon's voice (to borrow Roland Barthes' terminology) seems to suggest genuine despair, and the rawness in this delivery does not seem to be ironic, even if the lyrics can be taken sardonically. It is thus a song which presents a tortured artist pose, underscored by a wryness about that same Romantic ethos. Looking forward to punk, there is a combination of knowing lyric-writing and raw, "authentic"-signifying presentation in which a song is, in some sense, a balancing act between two contrasting impulses (the lyrical and the musical - including the sound of the voice). It seems up to the listener to determine which of these is more significant, and whether the song works as a whole.

On Lennon's earliest solo record (*John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, 1970), 'God' stands out as a song in which he explicitly renounces the circumstances which made him the icon he is. "God is a concept, by which we measure our pain" opens the song, and

paints God as a purely personalised entity, increasing or decreasing depending on how troubled your life is, or has been. The lyric culminates with a litany of people or concepts that John himself does not believe in, including “magic”, “Bible”, “Zimmerman” (aka Bob Dylan) and “Beatles”, before settling on the one thing he believes in is himself, and Yoko Ono. Despite being consumed by a sense of negation - and his seeming negation of his former role as a member of The Beatles - his renunciation of his previous stardom is simply to recreate himself in the persona of “John Lennon”, the authentic, truth-telling artist. The lyrical debunking of his former stardom leads, effectively, to the primal scream therapy influenced indulgence of Lennon’s persona circa 1970 - seeing himself, more than ever, than an archetypal tortured artist. In a personal declaration, it seems to be one of his most plodding compositions, and far more self-indulgent than the infamous ‘Revolution 9’.

Quite apart from his connection with a Romantic ideology, Lennon, as the “coolest” Beatle, both during and after the band’s lifespan, can be said to blaze a trail through youth cultural styles and fads in the 1960s and early 1970s. This is apparent not only in terms of say, the fashions of The Beatles in public (particularly post 1966, when they ceased to be dressed in a specific way by Brian Epstein), but also in Lennon’s own fleeting advocacy of certain political causes. His political leanings are to be discussed further later in this chapter. Lennon’s role was central to the development of The Beatles’ approach to songwriting and using the recording studio as a creative tool, along with producer George Martin. In terms of appearance, Lennon reflected a certain kind of Carnaby Street fashionability in the late 1960s, followed by an embrace

of less gaudy, more spartan hippy style, and later to an adoption of beards and flannels, bearing some resemblance to the homespun Americana image conveyed by North American folk-rockers The Band. This seemed - particularly in the latter case - to be somehow related to ideas about musical approach; *Let It Be*, for instance, was intended as a back-to-basics, live recording experience, related to the stripped down approach pursued by The Band and Bob Dylan by this point in the late 1960s. The importance of looking the part in this context highlights the centrality of the correct sort of public image at this point in time; why should one need to *look* like The Band to *sound* like The Band?

In terms of Lennon's political stance, the oppositional element of his music and public utterances has been somewhat overstated. A case in point is found in a relatively recent L.A Times piece entitled 'Imagine – A Lasting Hymn To Controversy' by Lennon scholar Jon Wiener:

For decades, schools on both sides of the Atlantic have banned the song at concerts and graduations. In 1972, seniors at Denmark High in Green Bay, Wis., voted to make 'Imagine' their class song. The principal rejected their choice, claiming the song was "anti-religious and anti-American with communist overtones." But the students had the last word: At their 20th reunion, the class made 'Imagine' its official reunion theme. (Wiener on the controversial aspects of Lennon's most iconic song)

Wiener's citation of the reaction against 'Imagine' in Wisconsin seems more a reflection of Cold War paranoia in the United States than of the artist's political outlook. Possessing a certain skepticism about the efficacy of taking protests to the streets, his sensibility questions whether any kind of coherent philosophy coalesced in the New Left activism of the late 1960s. Lennon's statement that "people should ask what they are rioting for, not against" (quoted in Quantick 27) suggests that frustration and the desire to take down "the system" often lacks any kind of positive programme - something which he himself, I would argue, is guilty of. Proclaiming the fact that "I'm an artist first, and a politician second" on *The Dick Cavett Show*, Lennon re-emphasises the artist-society false dichotomy. It presents a view of himself as an individual standing apart from society, with his role as one who and comments on it artistically, either overtly or more obliquely. Even so, the fact that he wishes to be categorised - even at only a secondary level - as a politician is intriguing. Lennon thus doesn't wish to be entirely removed from the field, presumably because he feels he has something important to articulate. The wider significance of Lennon's politics is touched on by Wiener in a different context:

John's growing self-consciousness in the late sixties was part of a wider cultural phenomenon in which rock critics and antiwar writers began to think seriously about the relationship between the counterculture and the antiwar movement, began to examine the political status of rock music and the cultural dimension of New Left politics. When John Lennon released a new record, it wasn't simply consumed by a passive audience; when he announced a new



political project, it wasn't simply observed. People argued about his projects (*Come Together* xviii).

The idea of Lennon acting as a catalyst for discussion is intriguing. Rather than embodying any specifically coherent political outlook or engagement per sé, his often contradictory or irregular opinions were at least something to debate – perhaps leading to a greater awareness of societal/cultural forces on a larger level. Even before Lennon's name-dropping of Huey Newton, the political significance which The Beatles embodied – quite before their increased lyrical or musical sophistication – has been analysed in the context of the band's early 1960s by Dave Marsh in his book *The Beatles Second Album*:

“The Mersey Sound is the voice of 80,000 crumbling houses and 30,000 people on the dole,” wrote London's communist newspaper, *The Daily Worker*, in December 1963. The Beatles showing no particular allegiance to the working class (other than in their accent, demeanor, sense of humor, ambition, diet, greed, and choice of music), *The Daily Worker* had no particular use for them. Its article gave no sign that people from the Mersey working class finding a way to speak for themselves – about anything – might be an improvement over the class system that insisted there always was and always out to be someone of superior mien, status, and wealth to speak for them (21).

Marsh puts forward an interesting thesis here – The Beatles' apparently subaltern expression suggests the possibility of a change in the class outlook of Britain itself. In his time with The Beatles, the most obvious commentary by Lennon on politics is contained within the song 'Revolution', and its two different versions. The version on 'The White Album' is of a slower tempo and a more bluesy and folksy tone. Pithy rhymes such as "if you go around carrying pictures of Chairman Mao, you're not gonna make it with anyone anyhow" underline the apparent unhip nature of professing political allegiances and the aforementioned directionless rioters, ironic considering the consistent namechecking of Mao and his 'little red book' by Lennon himself only a few years later. The key lyric – "and when you talk about destruction, don't you know that you can count me out...in" – shows the songwriter's ambiguity about the functionality of the idea that destruction is a form of creation. However, the re-recorded single version of 'Revolution' removes this ambiguity, with Lennon settling on wanting to be counted out of the process. Radical newspaper *Black Dwarf* contributor John Hoyland was, in turn, "so disappointed by that song. I saw it as an attack on everything we were fighting for. It fell on the other side of the divide" (quoted in Doggett 199). This was in a climate of some degree of violence on the streets of London. Tariq Ali – later editor of *Black Dwarf* – had organised the Trotskyist Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) anti-war protest in March 1968. A 25,000 strong demonstration, Mark Donnelly characterised the action as follows:

This was the most violent of all the anti-war marches. Unquestionably some of the demonstrators relished the prospect of a violent clash with the police.

Equally, the police hardly shrank from cracking a few heads during fighting that went on for two hours...Although the press reported that 117 police and 45 demonstrators were treated for injuries, these figures failed to include those beaten marchers who were hauled away by friends to avoid arrest and who were left to nurse their own wounds as best they could (148).

Oddly, the more clearly apolitical bent is combined with far more abrasive music and overdriven guitars/drums. A link can be made between the reluctance to embrace urban revolution and the nature of the closest equivalent that England had to the Baader-Meinhof gang, namely The Angry Brigade, London's only urban terrorist grouping. Though using bombs (they planted 24 of them), they studiously avoided the more violent methods of their international contemporaries; no fatalities ever resulted from their efforts (Wheen 75), and their intention was often to goad and to spook the powers that be, rather than to aggressively combat them. Humorously, they were categorised by one of their former number (Jake Prescott) as less angry, more so "the Slightly Cross Brigade" (78).

In the context of Lennon's debut solo album *Lennon/The Plastic Ono Band* (1970), personal catharsis, influenced by a course of Arthur Janov's primal scream therapy, abounds. One song which stands out as a bigger statement is the stripped down, acoustic guitar led folk song 'Working Class Hero'. In *Lennon Remembers*, he feels that "its concept is revolutionary, and I hope it's for workers and not for tarts and fags" (110). It is a warning to people who apparently are being co-opted in the middle ground of society, and to avoid following "their rules". It seems revolutionary only in

the sense that it seeks to promote awareness of the nature of a conformist, capitalist society which seeks to homogenise individual experience. Foreshadowing the views of the Sex Pistols' manager and punk rock theoretician Malcolm McLaren, that is to say that "*the middle classes invented the commodity* (italics in original). It defines our ambitions, our aspirations, our quality of life. Its effects are repression - loneliness - boredom (quoted in Savage, 37)." The closing lyric is perhaps the most compelling - "if you want to be a hero, then just follow me." Following Lennon, I would suggest, is a move towards a degree of self-enlightenment, and a cynical decrying; rather than a call to arms, or to the organisation/mobilisation of the working classes, it is to find strength in opening one's eyes, aside from what the so-called establishment/"they" seek to inculcate. There is again, the sense, of the detached and realistic artist persona here, as treated earlier in this chapter. Left-wing popular music scholar Dave Harker in *One For The Money* identified the song's "bullshitting anti-intellectualism" (213). This arose as a byproduct of Lennon's desire to differentiate his approach from more pompous rockist gestures à la Frank Zappa - "I admire [him] a bit, but he's a fuckin' intellectual" (Wenner 166). The difficulties and hypocrisies latent in Lennon's position are also apparent in the song:

If 'Working Class Hero' is a 'revolutionary song', in what ways is it subversive of the established order? Its very title expresses the dilemma of the successful popular songwriter and singer. In what way is Lennon, for example, a hero *of* that class? How can you be a hero in any meaningful way without identifying wholeheartedly with that class; and doesn't that mean that you have to have

lived the class experience fully enough to understand it? Put crudely, Lennon's working-class credentials are dubious – grammar school, art college – however serious the intention is to write *for* 'the people' (Harker 213).

The reference to “credentials” may be unfair – should Lennon's background completely preclude him from artistic comment? However, not only is there a question of adopting and appropriating a cause célèbre (I.e workers' liberation) in a perhaps tokenistic way, but there is also a disingenuousness (Lennon is not *of* this class) and a patronising element (he purports to speak *for* this group) at work. Connected to this is a rather solipsistic artist persona, as discussed earlier, increasing the hubristic tendencies in Lennon's work. There is also the hypocrisy of a millionaire decrying the idiocy of consumers, and the attendant ills of capitalist hegemony. Harker writes:

Heroes suffer, go through 'head changes', feel pain everywhere. Who is responsible for the pain? Of course, the people who put him in that position – the position he once wanted and still shows no sign of giving up – the buyers of records and the music industry, *they* are to blame. So Lennon patronizes, confuses, labels, gets generally aggressive and inchoate, and then lets the 'sound' take the weight of the meaning, puts all the responsibility on the shoulders of the listener (215).

I would argue that the tendency of Lennon to dip in and out of politics shows apparently loosely held beliefs. His associations with intermittent radical chic cause célèbres and iconic left-wing cultural figures are opposed to engagement with actual activism. There is to this day controversy over whether Lennon gave financial support to the Provisional IRA in the early 1970s - this has been disputed in different quarters, but I feel that Beatles' official biographer Hunter Davies take ("I wouldn't be at all surprised if he gave money to the IRA. John liked stirring it up") on the situation is accurate. Rather than having a strong ideological attachment to the idea of a united Ireland, I think Lennon's motivation in flirting with being a benefactor of apparent revolutionaries was more to do with a desire to stir things up rather than on a more wholehearted, politically committed level. On this note, his most transparently political long-player - *Some Time In New York City* (1972) - contains songs such as 'The Luck Of The Irish' and 'Sunday Bloody Sunday', giving an armchair leftist's perspective on the then nascent Troubles in Northern Ireland. Given that the context of the writing of the latter song was the brutal killing of 13 unarmed civilians at a civil rights march in Derry (Ferriter 626), it is understandable that a songwriter of Lennon's emotional and political sensitivity would be moved to write about it. However, the songs lyrics (and, indeed, its vaguely funky rock and roll sound) seem crass and inappropriate - lyrically, it veers from fairly straightforward journalistic style details of the massacre, to more hard left sentiments, effectively wishing the 'Brits Out', and comparing deprived areas of Catholic Northern Ireland as being akin to "concentration camps". Such heavy subject matter seems to both clash with and suit

the music employed. Certainly the gravitas of the words are offset by the funky backing music, but in another sense, the unsubtle, broad strokes approach in categorising Northern Irish politics seems matched by unsubtle, in your face music. The reception of the album was decidedly poor – Frontani identifies the extent of apparent artistic failure: “crushed by the album’s commercial and critical failure, and by the weight of Nixon administration’s efforts to deport him, Lennon’s future efforts were less likely to be directed through radical politics” (*The Cambridge Companion To The Beatles* 173). Frontani attributes the failure of such overt politicking as down to the tendency of Beatles/Lennon fans to wish to engage with the songwriter through his more personal (and perhaps solipsistic) lyrical statements. Hence why his first two solo albums - largely but not entirely consisting of personal outpourings - were commercially and critically successful. Also, there is a sentiment implicit in the solipsistic grandeur of seminal Lennon compositions ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ or ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ that withdrawal from the hectic nature of everyday life (e.g in the former, ‘no one I think is in my tree’; the latter ‘turn off your mind, relax and float downstream’) is preferable to engagement. This tendency - with echoes of *Under The Net* hero Jake Donoghue’s proclamation that “work is a curse” - is a fairly easy get out clause, especially from a millionaire musician. A certain political implication has been extrapolated by this gesture by Dave Harker in *One For The Money*, suggesting that the solipsistic lyrics and studio artifice of the Beatles’ recorded output after they ceased playing live in 1966 emphasised their disconnection from communal

experience; their recordings at this point were perhaps better suited to private experience (35).

The vision of the Beatles' enterprise - Apple Corp - as an anything goes, hippy-influenced take on capitalism was undercut by the truth that "their (The Beatles') accountant told them that they could give their money to the government or do something with it" (Spizer 142). Thus, rather than anarchically subverting capitalism, it was to an extent a shrewd and pragmatic move to avoid tax. However, the sheer plethora of eclectic recording artists released by Apple Records was, in a sense, freewheeling enough to be a genuinely freakish, anomalous record label (this is discussed further later in the chapter). There is also the interesting case of Lennon returning the MBE he and the other three Beatles received from Labour prime minister Harold Wilson. Wilson, he of the rhetoric of the "white heat" of the technological revolution that was to sweep through Britain and change it for all and sundry, was keen to ally himself with The Beatles and portray himself as a kindred spirit. Young (compared to his Conservative predecessors at least), from a more ordinary background and not fond of moderating his non-R.P accent for the benefit of the press or Westminster, there were certain connections apparent between Wilson and The Beatles. However, the cynicism surrounding politics and reflected by the satirists of the previous chapter did not wash away due to such mere coincidences. Caught up in the always hyped "special relationship" with the U.S.A, Wilson offered support to the American government in Vietnam, as well as supporting Nigerian government aggression against the secessionist Republic of Biafra. In response to this,



Lennon returned the MBE the Beatles received in 1965, stating the following in a letter to the Queen:

Your Majesty, I am returning my MBE as a protest against Britain's involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra thing, against our support of America in Vietnam and against 'Cold Turkey' slipping down the charts. With Love, John Lennon.

Not wanting to be co-opted, or seen to be co-opted by, the Labour Party or the political establishment, Lennon made a stand in this regard which was quite bold and admirable. Again, his self-deprecating wit comes to the fore here, fitting in a reference to being bitter about the poor chart performance of his heroin addiction referencing 'Cold Turkey' (again, an unfiltered, emboldened drug reference) as part of the reason for his dissenting mood. There is also the implicit point of the absurdity, perhaps, of him having to return his MBE medal to the Queen herself, despite the fact that decision on the award of the MBE in the first place was the Prime Minister's. A disillusionment with mainstream politics in general is not necessarily going to lead to a genuinely progressive programme for challenging said "establishment". Indeed, the casual tone of what Lennon is coming across with seems to be akin to some of the more superficial aspects of 1960s counterculture politics, namely that an eye-catching, public relations savvy gesture is as strong as more active, committed political engagement.

As referenced at the beginning of this chapter, the quintessentially British genre of skiffle is vitally important to the genesis of The Beatles as a group. An amateurish tendency in terms of musical ability, it placed the emphasis on an autodidactic approach to learning how to play an instrument, as well as containing many examples of British reworkings of existing American folk and blues forms (the classic example of this would be Glaswegian Lonnie Donegan's hit version of the classic blues song by Leadbelly 'Rock Island Line', delivered in a hybrid West Coast Scotland/mid Atlantic tone). Early rock 'n' roll, of course, was also a key force at work here too, for instance the raw, early Sun Records-era output of Elvis Presley, with an emphasis on vitality and energy not too far removed from the expressivity of both discontented 1950s kitchen sink writing, and later punk rock music. Nik Cohn's account of the appeal of early rock 'n' roll is instructive here; it offered the possibility of release from the humdrum for people otherwise condemned to a dreary existence for its performers, as well as presenting a fierce, condensed and immediate distillation of youth in the form of a 45" single for its listeners. Foreshadowing the ethos around punk rock years later, Cohn describes Buddy Holly's "broken teeth, wire glasse, halitosis, plus every possible kind of country Southernness. He wasn't appetizing. In fact, he was an obvious no-hoper (41). Nonetheless, Holly made it, before dying tragically in an air crash. Lennon himself categorised Little Richard's work as "pretty avant-garde" (Wenner 103), and analysed the directness of rock 'n' roll in the following, somewhat esoteric terms:

It's not perverted or thought about, it's not a concept, it is a chair, not a design for a chair, or a better chair, or a bigger chair, or a chair with leather or with design...it is the first chair. It is a chair for sitting on, not chairs for looking at or being appreciated. You sit on that music (ibid).

Intellectualism – as referenced earlier - and over-abstraction are to be specifically avoided. In avoiding such moves, the earthy, perhaps sensual nature of the music is made apparent - “you sit on that music”. This is not to underplay the aesthetic significance of the form – Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis are “like primitive painters”, and Chuck Berry “one of the all-time great poets” (ibid 166).

Yet this was only the beginning of The Beatles' appeal. From their roots in skiffle and early rock 'n' roll – as well as the “the relatively homey” Irish and Scottish folk music combined with the maritime “musical exotica” of Liverpool (Mellers 32) - the band progressed to include myriad references to other forms of music, as well as to literature, television, film etc. The band covered the title song from the Broadway adaptation of Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste Of Honey* on their debut L.P *Please Please Me* (1962). Nods like the introductory non-sequitur on *Let It Be*'s 'Dig A Pony' - “I dig a pygmy, by Charles Hawtrey and the Deaf-Aids. Phase One, in which Doris gets her oats” - reference the popular *Carry On* series of comedy films, whilst having something of a Spike Milligan/Goon-esque humorous tone. Thus, the band tied up a certain satirical/comedic influence gleaned from The Goons, along with a nod to British New Wave cinema. Additionally, Ian MacDonald's take on the song's lyrics “celebrating countercultural claims that society's old values and taboos were dead, (and) that life

was a game and art a free-for-all" (265), an interpretation which adds another level of crossover referentiality to the track. Perhaps the strongest achievement of Lennon and the band within popular culture was down to the sheer volume of lyrical/verbal and (more particularly) musical reference points made. Even in the less critically lauded pre-1965 period of their existence, the Beatles made musical references not simply to their cornerstone influences of skiffle/rock 'n' roll, but also to early Motown records soul (in covering The Marvellettes 'Please Mr. Postman'), finger-picked folk music ('I'll Follow The Sun') and heavy, maudlin country and western ('Baby's In Black'). The musical magpie impulse continues more prominently after 1965's *Rubber Soul*, whereupon the lyrics of the band become more sophisticated and, particularly in Lennon's case, more confessional ('In My Life' on this record is thus a key developmental moment).

Without wishing to elaborate too heavily on the chronological developments in the band's discography, I feel it would be instructive to look at perhaps their most famous and critically lauded album, *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Again, in terms of musical inter-textuality, the record seems to hit a new peak, mixing a loose concept album theme with songs that veer from music-hall style exercises to Indian-inspired experiments, culminating in 'A Day In The Life's multi-part, multi-faceted epic popular song. In the case of this particular song - later covered by the band who are the subject of chapter 9, The Fall - Lennon's largely newspaper derived lyrics add a strange, honest poignancy to a musically highly ambitious popular song. According to Ian MacDonald, this adds to the sense of layered meaning in the song on the one hand

concerned with “the alienating effect of ‘the media’. On another, it looks beyond what the Situationists called ‘the society of the spectacle’ to the poetic consciousness invoked by the anarchic wall-slogans of May 1968 in Paris” (182). I think he elevates the lyrical analysis a bit here, but against a context of pioneering studio experimentation and a semi-orchestral arrangement, the sundry quotations, veering from stories about potholes in Blackburn to the death of an aristocratic gentleman gain a strange and poignant haunted quality. For Allan Moore, this links the 1967 album and older elements of the English music hall tradition. This connects a certain kind of nostalgia and wistful tone, which can be traced back to John Osborne and *The Entertainer*, with the flamboyant and forward thinking (but perhaps still nostalgic) tendencies of the late 1960s Beatles.

Arguably from the point when Lennon claimed to have invented the use of feedback in pop music on the intro to the 1964 Beatles’ single ‘I Feel Fine’ (MacDonald 108), there has been a tension between supposed avant garde or experimental elements and pop sensibilities in his songwriting. The apotheosis of this kind of fusion in his work, many would say, was between 1966 and 1968, from *Revolver* to ‘The White Album’. In this period, Lennon was able - with the ample assistance of producer George Martin - to incorporate tape loops, classical orchestration, and innovative, proto-multi tracking techniques into his music. In addition to this, his lyric writing became more obviously imbued with the effects of his experiences with marijuana and LSD, producing oblique, impressionistic lyrics a considerable distance from the earlier Beatles records, and even the widely lauded, sophisticated pop of *Rubber Soul*.

As David Quantick put it, “freed from touring, freed from Beatlemania, and freed from convention (don’t take drugs, don’t take months in the studio), the Beatles went from being the most popular band in the world to being the most important (33).” Their label Apple was also a significant development - though ultimately winding down in 1976, it had “fostered the release of a diverse batch of records that included pop rock, rock and roll, big band standards, brass bands, jazz, classical, Indian ragas, Krishna chants, rhythm and blues, gospel, country, folk, experimental, electronic and Cajun hoedowns” (Spizer 151). This could be termed rather broadly as the art school tendency in Lennon’s work - the significance of this institution for fostering pop art oriented thinking has been analysed by Simon Frith & Howard Horne in *Art Into Pop*, as well as in Michael Bracewell’s account of the early years of Roxy Music *Remake/Remodel*. Yet all the while his background in skiffle and his embrace of rock and roll as a teenager recurs. In *Lennon Remembers* he makes clear his self-identification as a rock and roll rhythm guitarist. His love of the early Elvis is unabashed, and though the back to basics approach of the final released Beatles album *Let It Be* tends to be regarded as largely Paul McCartney’s concept, Lennon himself was certainly not adverse to this kind of approach. ‘The Ballad Of John & Yoko’ is effectively a generic rock and roll exercise, though with direct, honest lyrics about Lennon’s marriage to, and honeymoon with, Yoko Ono. As hitherto stated, his first solo album after the Beatles’ split truly was a break, characterised by raw musicianship and a stripped down approach, no-frills approach, and containing far more confessional and confrontational lyrics compared to his output with The

Beatles. *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*'s intelligibility, combined with a certain lyrical directness, stands in stark contrast to the near contemporary record *Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band*, an LP primarily credited to Yoko Ono who takes most of the record's lead vocals, and Lennon's role is seemingly as a rhythm guitarist in the main. The latter record has an avant-rock edge, becoming in later years an inspiration for No Wave groups such as Sonic Youth, DNA, Lydia Lunch etc. Indeed, this contrast (or symbiosis) was emphasised by the issuing of *Yoko Ono/Plastic Ono Band*'s noise-filled lead off song 'Why' (featuring screamed lead vocals by Ono herself) as a b-side to *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*'s 'Mother', a soul-influenced lament for Lennon's dead parent. In a sense, these two post-Beatles LPs are an extension of what Lennon's output looked like on *The White Album*. Alternating between confessional, incredibly personal songwriting ('Julia'), wilful rock obscurity ('Glass Onion') and extensive sound collage/tape editing ('Revolution Number 9'), *The White Album*'s crossover between pop and unpopular forms was groundbreaking. Whereas *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* was experimental in often more succinct, edited forms, 'The White Album' had a remit which extended more into the wilful and self-indulgent side of the band. All the same, such a fusion of styles has a connection with other movements of the time. The Situationist International - a key influence on the 1968 riots in Paris, particularly, but also to an extent in Britain - combined dense neo-Marxist theorising, experimental philosophy with reappropriation of mass media products such as comic books and advertising slogans, suggesting commonality and intertextual relationships as opposed to strictly defined (and sometimes arbitrary) divisions in forms. In The

Beatles' context, the grouping together of material as divergent as Paul McCartney's 'Honey Pie' (a cheesy music hall jaunt) or 'Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da' (a pop ska pastiche) with Lennon's sometimes more obtuse and challenging numbers was a powerful statement of breaking down barriers. This is even more startling when considering the sequencing of 'Revolution Number 9' - a piece reminiscent of John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen - right before McCartney's 'Honey Pie' on side 4 of the original vinyl release. As David Quantick writes: "no one in the history of recorded music has ever been so successful in introducing such extreme music to so many people, most of whom, admittedly, will try their best never to hear 'Revolution 9' (again). (151)" The fact that they were at least willing to follow the Beatles into sonic territory more familiar with the modern classical avant-garde (which still sounds intriguing today) is a testament to the sheer force of the band as popular culture icons, able to bring a broad fan-base into uncharted territories. Oddly, the myriad of sounds were, apparently, what "he thought the sound of revolution would be like" (ibid 153). MacDonald felt the "often sinister" tone of the track were down to its two key catalysts "chance determination and drugs" (232). Replace "drugs" with "Zen philosophy" and you've arrived at one John Cage. Consciously or not, the exercise seems to be a reflection of Cage's own early manifesto - 'The Future Of Music: Credo' - delivered first for a lecture in 1937, but first published officially in 1958. The possibilities of noise-making he describes, decades earlier, seem reflected in the more adventurous recordings of The Beatles post-1965, and perhaps these tendencies reach a certain apotheosis with 'Revolution Number 9':



Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at 50 m.p.h. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them, not as sound effects, but as musical instruments...(music is) organization of sound...It is now possible for composers to make music directly, without the assistance of intermediary performers..centers of experimental music must be established. In these centers, the new materials, oscillators, generators, means for amplifying small sounds, film phonographs, etc., available for use. Composers at work using twentieth-century means for making music. Performances of results. Organization of sound for musical and extramusical purposes (theater, dance, film). THROUGH THE PRINCIPLE OF ORGANIZATION OR MAN'S COMMON ABILITY TO THINK (Cage 57).

There is another element to the cross-cultural elements of the Beatles. In their choice of cover songs at different junctures in their career, they seemed to embrace more wholeheartedly a carefree, unselfconscious approach to music performance in contrast to what more Romantic-minded critics might consider their artistic genius would suggest. From *Beatles For Sale* (1964), the John Lennon sung cover of country & western hit 'Mr. Moonlight' is a case in point. There is something sublimely ridiculous about their version, from the screamed introductory phrase of 'Mr. Moonlight' and Ringo's clod-hopping bongo drums to McCartney's schmaltzy, lounge-esque Hammond organ solo at the song's midpoint. "A gross quasi-calypso" (100) as termed by Ian MacDonald, I would argue that cover versions like this - and even later recordings,

such as their attempt (again, sung by Lennon) at a ramshackle version of Liverpoolian sea shanty 'Maggie May' from *Let It Be* - are, in a sense, more reflective of the absurd, daft elements of pop music that critics tend to omit from consideration when analysing Great Artists such as the Beatles and Bob Dylan. Representing less of a desire to show off good taste than a simple homage, 'Mr Moonlight' may, in some sense, be a reflection of The Beatles' own sense of humour, but it is also indicative of an engagement with forms of popular culture which are rather po-facedly dismissed as trash.

Dominic Sandbrook's central thesis in his history of the 1960s *White Heat* is that, though a certain cultural revolution did indeed occur in the decade (c.f Arthur Marwick), the true effects of liberalisation and permissiveness were to be more widely felt and genuinely embraced in the 1970s. The era of growing sexual permissiveness, liberalisation, and political change (the personal is the political) beginning did, thus, not really culminate in a total cultural revolution until quite a distance later. Yet the meaning of the 1960s is consistently a hotly tested battleground - coming "under attack from a right-wing political culture in search of something to blame for the socio-economic chaos it had created in the Eighties" (MacDonald 3). Even today, moves by the present government to introduce more selective practices in secondary education - rolling back the widespread comprehensivisation of the sector in the 1960s - and the encroaching privatisation of the National Health Service (whose national standing had been secured in that decade) can be seen as in some sense a reaction against what the Sixties supposedly represents. The coalescence of many

different cross-cultural elements within Lennon and The Beatles, along with their apolitical slant contrasted, suggest the sprawling possibilities of the decade itself. But, again, referring to Sandbrook's analysis, the aspects of liberalisation clashed with a sense of the residual conservatism inherent in Britain at the time. Dave Harker in his essay on 1960s pop in Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Cultural Revolution?* essay collection identifies rightly the parallel popularity of the likes of Englebert Humperdinck (who famously kept the Beatles' double A-side single 'Strawberry Fields Forever'/'Penny Lane' off the number one chart spot) and Cliff Richard, suggesting that the context of supposed counter-cultural pop hegemony at the time tends to be over-emphasised. The various elements which affected Lennon's career at this point are, all the same, a key part of and reflecting changes in British society at that point - the vastly expanding business of pop, and the importance of pop stardom, the breaking down of hierarchical barriers to success, the sense of optimism permeating the mid to late 1960s (and its attendant comedown in the 1970s), the utopian/radical currents both in politics and music and a Britain, to some extent, more content within itself, particularly amongst youth culture. This optimism and its attendant sense of (misguided) possibility is reflected near the close of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's 1971 *Dick Cavett Show* appearance, with Yoko's line that "total freedom for everybody is our goal, you know, that way...it'll be a utopia" - in retrospect, beautiful in its naiveté.

## Chapter 7 – *Quiet Riot*

Stephen Poliakoff is a playwright who has become well known - particularly - for his television drama and screen work as opposed to his early work for the stage. Indeed, it is in the context of his mid 1970s dramatic work that I find most interesting in the context of the cynic sensibility. The three plays to be discussed in this chapter - in chronological order, *Hitting Town*, *City Sugar* and *Strawberry Fields* - all bear the hallmarks of the sensibility. They each, with degrees of variation, possess the key characteristics of a Bohemian/Romantic approach to their heroes, an apolitical bent opposed to party politics and all-encompassing ideological solutions to the problems of society, and an engagement with popular forms, being somewhat anti-modernist and in opposition to a rigid high/low culture dichotomy. Due to the comparatively low amount of scholarly writing on this part of Poliakoff's career, I am to an extent ploughing new ground - hence I have used a more close reading style approach in analysing this work. The following quotation is taken from Poliakoff's own introduction to his collected *Plays: One*:

Written in February 1975, soon after the Birmingham and Guildford bombings...I became very interested in trying to write a play about a personal reaction to the violence and the ugly mood of the mid-seventies, about people growing inward and private and lonely, after the noise and frivolity of the sixties. Onlookers gradually slipping into a type of melancholy as Clare is at the

beginning of the play. *Hitting Town* was meant to have the simplicity and compactness of a short story so that the incestuous relationship seemed as fragile and impermanent as the architecture Clare and Ralph were passing through (xi).

It is certainly in some respects a reflection of the times that the motivational impulse being its writing is decidedly bleak in the post-sixties period. The reference to the mainland bombings of the IRA is important also - one the two central characters, Ralph, is an architecture student in Birmingham, and his sister Clare had feared that he had been caught into the bombing. Ralph is the man of action in the play as it were, turning up unannounced at Clare's flat in an unnamed English city (presumably Leicester, as two characters from *Hitting Town* recur in *City Sugar*, where the location is made explicit). He cajoles her reluctant self into coming out on the town with him, despite the fact that she is seemingly still distraught by a recent break-up. Complicating the action further, there is an incestuous tension between the two, building as the play progresses.

The "Sound of Muzak" (86) leads the two into a nearby Wimpy Bar, and a notorious scene portraying the negative byproducts of modern capitalist culture. Ralph states, "God I hate these places. They're multiplying all the time. Must make millions every day. They ought to be hounded (87)"; indeed, 1974 was - as Dominic Sandbrook identifies in his history of the period *State Of Emergency* - the year in which "the sinister arches of McDonalds were first raised over the streets of London" (342). Ralph is the rebellious, dissenting voice in the play, willing to publicise the fact that he

and Clare are brother and sister after being seen kissing in public (92). Ronald Hayman characterises Ralph as a “tense, charming, cynical, reckless boy, irritably turning his aggression in order to fight his way out of boredom and mediocrity” (121-122). A particularly grotesque incident from the Wimpy excursion is a tomato shaped ketchup dispenser, which when opened up is shown as being full up with cigarette ash and butts; Ralph’s sarcastic quip on discovering this is “you can always tell a town by what’s in its tomatoes” (90). Presumably nothing of great value, in this case.

The alienated, detached Wimpy waitress Nicola - who seems quite disconnected from reality - becomes a strange companion to Ralph and Clare on their sojourn into town. Some of her past-times seem downright weird. After Ralph remarks about the preponderance of television shops in the area (“the new appalling precinct” - 96), Nicola responds matter-of-factly: “Yes, I watch those often. You can stand in front of them for hours watching for free. Till the colours go funny and you feel sick” (ibid 96). She also enjoys shouting in the desolate quiet, a “sudden short scream” (98) according to the stage directions. A more satisfying release for her seems to occur in popular music forms - in this case, disco. With the sound of a hyperactive disc jockey cajoling the assembled kids to dance, set in a “filthy black room”, Ralph thinks it to be “hell on earth” (104). Yet, drab though it seems, it is a step beyond the ghost town atmosphere of the city centre. Nicola is obsessed with getting the right amount of make-up on for her “spot” at the disco, and, through her performance singing to a backing track, culminating in a crowd silencing “tremendous and shattering scream”, she articulates a sense of fury which is abstract and powerful, and which has hitherto been shown to

be suppressed. The words of Hall and Whannell in *The Popular Arts* come to mind, though in this case the version of 'Wheel's On Fire' (108), it is more than likely not beat music: "Beat music is loud and vulgar, but it is at least music for the living" (307).

In a different context, there is widespread use of muzak in the urban-consumerist haunts that the characters find themselves in. Just as in *Strawberry Fields*, the contrast between the violence, turmoil and aggression of the characters and the bland, neutral, mass-produced sound furniture is stark. Ralph describes his fantasy of the industrial production of muzak:

There's one woman, you know, one *single, anonymous, lady*, who arranges all this muzak, produces it, by herself, she does, this is true! It just pours out of her, uncontrollably, tons and tons of it! A real madwoman...There are three enormous warehouses of it. This is absolutely true. And they take it away in lorries - tankers...Drive it to every corner of England. Everywhere you go you hear her artistry, flowing out. She can rise both to a small cafe and a major airport. The lot. To keep the people 'happy'! (88)

The postwar reconstruction, as in *Strawberry Fields* and *City Sugar*, is denigrated in *Hitting Town*. Ralph, again, is the voice of iconoclasm, referring to the reconstruction of his hometown's city centre - "you know most of the architects of this atrocity are probably in gaol or just about to be. But we're left with it!" (96). This unquestionably alludes to the criminality and dodgy dealings of the likes of Newcastle John Poulson, a corrupt town planner who realised the lucrative money-making potential in

rebuilding post-war Britain (Sandbrook, *State Of Emergency* 509). Both Ralph and Clare keep reiterating how negative an environment the place is, consistently telling the younger character Nicola of the need to escape. Escape is also a temptation for them, though Ralph's fantasy of their own escape is underscored with a firm sense of the ludicrous: "we'd get into a car, with a gun maybe, and some music, and set off, just like any film. And probably have a few sudden killings, you know, in the hot sun on the motorway" (113). Incidentally, this is somewhat prescient of part of the plot to *Strawberry Fields*. At the play's conclusion, Ralph's desire for escape - into a taboo, romantic relationship with his sister - is rebuffed, though they do ultimately have sex in the second to last scene. He threatens to make a hoax bomb threat, but doesn't have sufficient money for the phone to complete it; at the play's close, normality is seemingly restored as Ralph will leave "first thing" in the morning, whilst Clare remains in Leicester.

*City Sugar* (1975) presents the central character of the commercial radio dj Leonard Brazil, who recurs in the Poliakoff's dramatic follow-up *Hitting Town*. Poliakoff – once again, in his introduction to *Plays:One* – wrote of his authorial motivations:

(the play was written in) the era of the Bay City Rollers...Of course I'd grown up during Beatlemania, so this was hardly a new phenomenon. But what did seem new was the extraordinarily, synthetic nature of what these kids were being offered, their enormous hunger apparently being cynically manipulated.

(Poliakoff, xi)



Leonard Brazil is, of course, the manipulator-in-chief. In the stage directions of the play, he is described as “totally in control of his medium”, a “master disc-jockey” (130). However, the action of the play maps Brazil’s regression into losing this control. Even from the play’s outset, Brazil’s variations in tone are sometimes jarring:

I went to the cinema yesterday, saw the very excellent *Death Wish*, a lot of rape and gore and blood and guts, for those of you that like your toast buttered that way - me, I prefer the lovely, the scintillating, the mind-expanding Lynsey De Paul (131)

Brazil’s contempt for his own profession increases as the play progresses, strangely coinciding with the possibility of greater success in the field - there are references to a potential job with Capital Radio in London throughout the play. Robin Nelson suggests that “the irony at the centre of *City Sugar*...is that the protagonist gains more and more success in a role to which he is wholly unsuited (80).” This is debatable, however: is it not a recognition that a nihilistic, cynical approach to a job can actually be rewarded? Nelson’s take has a hint of naiveté; just because he despises his job doesn’t mean he cannot be good at it. In contrast to Leonard’s self-critical (perhaps self-loathing) professionalism, his younger colleague - engineer/producer Rex - is desperate to ascend the media ladder. He is constantly in awe of Leonard’s “talent”, and consistently pushes to try to get air time in which to display his presenting skills, even though his initial role is really that of a lackey and comedic patsy. Indeed, Leonard’s crass insulting of Rex on the air foreshadows the “banter” of 1990s radio stars such as Chris Evans and Chris Moyles, repeatedly referring to Rex’s fictionally excessive

weight as a tawdry way of boosting his own egoistic persona, portraying him (unrealistically) as an “obese lump”(134). At the play’s close, when Rex has a more extended run on the air, he speaks to the audience of the weight dripping off him, symbolising the shift in the power dynamics of their relationship - when Leonard leaves, it is implied that Rex will take on his role on Leicester radio.

One of his Rex’s earlier pitches to Leonard is an idea to read out an absurd news item on air for comic effect; he describes the newspaper cutting to his boss:

‘And we’ve just heard that in a Walls factory in Luton, a severed leg was found in a vat of raspberry ripple ice cream. The authorities are checking to see if they’ve got a cone big enough for it (148).’

Leonard reacts aggressively to this off-putting, macabre anecdote - though whether this is out of a sense of competitive aggression or not, the audience is not sure - but Rex defends his choice, stating “people like black jokes - I’ve got some *much* blacker ones, you know” (148). The generation gap is apparent where, whilst Leonard is more abrasive in his persona, he seems to have an inbuilt sense of self-censorship and what seems to go too far, as it were; Rex does not, and will do anything for a laugh. Rex is genuinely a fan of Leonard Brazil’s dj-ing, and Brazil is astonished to learn that Rex listens to his show all the time, even when not working, similar to his astonishment at Nicola’s obsession with the Yellow Tops (163). Leonard seems to resent the unthinking youthfulness of Rex; he thinks of himself as inherently possessing more

integrity than his youthful apprentice. He rants on the topic of lost optimism and social change, as he felt it in the music of the 1960s:

LEONARD. I'm in a sentimental mood, aren't I? You're much too young to remember, of course.

REX (*smiles, looks innocent*). Too young to remember what, Leonard.

LEONARD. What do you think (*Abrasive*). Remember before the rot set in. I'm not in any way nostalgic about that time.

REX (*smiling, watching him*). Oh no?

LEONARD. No I'm not. I'm certainly not one of those mooning leftovers wallowing backwards all the time.

REX. No. Of course not.

LEONARD. I know exactly what it was like. (*Loud*). Exactly.

REX. Yes.

LEONARD (*staring straight at him*). But it's undeniable, Rex, that the music we were producing on that label, seven or eight years ago, was *alive*. That is incontestible. It had gut, it was felt, and it kicked, sometimes savagely...Because, of course, everything seemed possible...I was even quite militant in a quiet way...We thought things were changing and all that romantic crap (164).

His rant is a combination of contradictory factors: he claims to not being nostalgic, he clearly is; he rues the sense of the loss of possibilities, but undercuts this with his reference to “romantic crap”. The vitality inherent in the awareness of emergent change is reminiscent of John Osborne’s writings - the music was “*alive...it had gut, it was felt, and it kicked, sometimes savagely.*” The aftermath has left him, but his memory of the times sets him apart from the rest of the characters in *City Sugar* - having lived through it, he seems marked out as unique by it. As a part of between song banter, it seems a little abrasive, referencing the ultra-violent Charles Bronson exploitation film, especially as his show is on a Sunday afternoon. As a true pro, he’s strong in the self-analysis of his song selection - “it’s a particularly grisly lot...I seem to have played pap for an entire week - might as well have stuck the stylus into cotton wool” (132); quality thus is not a priority, but rather playing lowest common denominator tunes. His skill as a dj when dealing with listener phone-ins is referred to as “the actor in me..it’s what makes it reasonably good” (ibid). In contrast to a more elevated view that one might have of the musically omnivorous dj, turning on listeners to unknown bands and highlighting unexpected connections between genres, Brazil is not especially innovative, and with his self-analysis about the “grisly lot” of tunes featured on his show (yet playing them anyway) betrays the depth of his cynicism about his job.

In terms of his record selections, Poliakoff seems to contrast the apparent trashiness and vacuity of contemporary 1970s pop - The Osmonds feature quite frequently, as well as Peters and Lee, “something very cheap and nasty” (149) and, of

course, The Bay City Rollers parody that is The Yellow Tops - is contrasted with the nostalgic nods to Brazil's younger self and music taste. He plays what he terms "a raving cataclysmic ditty from 1968, the Rolling Stones and 'Street Fighting Man'" (147), 'See Emily Play' by Pink Floyd, 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale' by Procol Harum, 'Summer In The City' by The Lovin' Spoonful and 'Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head' by B.J Thomas. All are from the late 1960s, and are from the period which was considered (generally by baby-boomers like Brazil) as being the hey-day of pop musical expression. Brazil himself, in the introduction to 'See Emily Play' by the Syd Barrett-led Pink Floyd, refers to the "golden days of 1967 when London was alive and wriggling and bursting at the seams, remember? Or perhaps you don't" (161). The distance from the present day to the heyday of the Beatles (and an album track from 1967's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*) is passingly referenced:

GIRL'S VOICE. Rita.

LEONARD (*slight smile*). Lovely Rita, Meter Maid?

RITA. What?

LEONARD. A reference to years gone by, don't let it worry you, Rita (138).

Aside from this, the modern festival experience is contrasted sharply with what presumably were the exultant celebrations of the 1960s; as Leonard puts it, "a grey shabby echo of the time when festivals really were celebrations. Everybody was lying about in lifeless heaps, mumbling apologetically, and getting bitten by horseflies (165)". In this, he connects with the mindset of the character of Kevin in *Strawberry*

*Fields*, and his views on the decline of the unity and camaraderie felt in the Summer of Love.

Contrasting vastly with Brazil, a deadpan sounding, teenage girl - Nicola Davies, previously a waitress in the grim Wimpy restaurant in *Hitting Town* - is the other central character of *City Sugar*. She is obsessed with The Yellow Tops and the radio in general, and comes into Brazil's orbit when she phones into his show and wins a competition for a record. Nicola now works in a supermarket, where the soundtrack to her work is the piped in sound of the "strangely personal" (141) Leonard Brazil on the radio. There is a palpable air of the grotesque in her work context, as when her friend and co-worker Susan speaks about defrosting the frozen foods: "we could fuse this fridge, you know...once saw it happen, all the food melts slowly, goes soggy and bad, and it all floats in a big kind of mush, you can pour the whole lot out like soup (142)." Always aware of the presence of a video camera monitoring their movements (in this context, it seems there purely to observe workers, rather than to deter shoplifters), the supermarket is a paranoid environment. The surveillance is reinforced by being searched upon leaving the premises by security staff: "my mum doesn't believe they search us. She can't think why they should have to, except for bombs" (143). It seems an oppositional take, in view of historian Dominic Sandbrook's categorisation of the concept of shopping "not as a necessity but as a pleasure, a leisure activity in itself" (*State Of Emergency* 339).

Brazil becomes obsessed with Nicola's blankness, and manipulates a competition to get to meet one of the members of The Yellow Tops to ensure that she gets to the final.

She is thought to be “an average girl” (150) by Leonard, and this is not necessarily a good thing: slightly older and perhaps nursing a hangover from the 1960s, he considers the key characteristic of the young of the 1970s as detachment and apathy: “if there was an earthquake today, or a full-scale revolution, those girls wouldn’t notice, not a chance” (ibid). Nonetheless, this seems to further fuel his obsession with Nicola. Brazil is exasperated that the final stage of the Yellow Tops competition - in which he asked listeners to make a life-sized effigy of their favourite member of the group - actually prompted a huge response: “They must have worked all through the night on these obscenities. They’re burrowing like moles to get up here!” (165). Nicola’s listening habits are that of the dedicated record collector, despite the apparent ephemeral nature of the Yellow Tops, it obviously holds considerable meaning for her, “sat here by the record player all night, listening to records, really quietly so *no one* could hear me” (172).

Towards the play’s conclusion, there is a possibility of impending escape for the two central characters, Leonard and Nicola. Leonard is apparently to leave to work for Capital Radio London, whilst Nicola is being encouraged by Susan to simply stay in London if she wins the competition to hang out with the Yellow Tops. The casually reactionary soundbites of Yellow Tops member Ross are played on air before the final competition: “people don’t work in this country, I mean that’s the trouble really, isn’t it, and somebody really has got to do something...I like cheerful music”; harsh political ‘critique’, juxtaposed with a predilection towards artistic banality (184). The competition between Jane and Nicola is incredibly intense; they both fail to name the

four members of the Beatles in response to Leonard's tie-break question, further emphasising the distance between the contemporary teenagers of *City Sugar* and the 1960s. Leonard seems to be excelling in this tense environment: "I've never heard you in better form" (196), newscaster John remarks. Ultimately, phone lines are opened, and listeners vote to deem Jane the winner. In the studio afterwards, Leonard asks Nicola bluntly: "You can't really like this shit, can you, do you really, deep down inside, like this music?" (201).

He explains his desire to meet her as he viewed her as "Miss Average" (202), and his final dialogue with her is devoted to attempting to provoke a reaction from her, to rouse her out of her detachment - "You almost feel, Nicola Davies - as if you're from another planet, do you know that?" (203). Yet, after the encounter with Brazil, Nicola does indeed seem changed, and seems to realise the ridiculousness of the Yellow Tops; seemingly more energised, this newly gained vitality seems focused on the idea of trashing the supermarket she works in. As in *Strawberry Fields*, this destruction as a form of creation idea is mirrored in the energy of the emergent punk rock movement in Britain.

Motorways and A roads are the central locations for Poliakoff's 1977 play *Strawberry Fields*, with attendant facilities such as lay-bys, grimy cafés, and disregarded, detritus filled toilets. With the proliferation of road building having been described by John Tyme as "the greatest threat to the interests of this nation in all its history" (quoted in Moran, 2006). In *Strawberry Fields*, roads are - despite their relative newness, already in decline, dotted sparsely with sundry disaffected individuals.



Though not stated explicitly, the trajectory for most of the play is the A1 from London to Edinburgh. Indeed, in *City Sugar*, Susan's remark about her unsuccessful time at school is connected directly to the road-building: "the traffic noise right by me...I never heard *anything* at school" (156). *Strawberry Fields* is a play which, like *Hitting Town* and *City Sugar*, is not overtly political, though it does present a portrayal of far-right politics (the "English People's Party", represented by the characters Charlotte and Kevin). *Strawberry Fields* also, like *City Sugar*, is critical of the hippy dream of the 1960s (its title is a nod to 'Strawberry Fields Forever'). how the play parodies and dissects 1960s hippy music culture, both in its ironic title (referencing one of the Beatles' most iconic singles, 'Strawberry Fields Forever'). References to music abound in this work, though this - the last of the three Poliakov plays that I will analyse - seems to work as a piece with the near contemporaneous explosion of punk rock music in British popular culture.

Historian of modern Britain Kenneth O. Morgan identifies, in the early 1970s, "growing disillusion with the Keynesian economists, the Fabian planners, the post-Beveridge social engineers, (and) the consensual liberal positivists who had governed the realm like so many conquistadors for a quarter of a century" (354). Dominic Sandbrook characterised the same period as one during which "Britain was becoming a byword for industrial unrest and economic collapse" (*The Way We Were* 593). Disdain for centralised planning was growing, and this encompassed a dislike for two notable elements of the post-war reconstruction – high rise, Brutalist social housing, and motorways. Despite some undoubted successes in both spheres, an overall sense

of Brutalist progress was resisted for eroding physical landscapes, as well as being held to account for the destruction of a sense of working-class cohesion - indeed, critic Michael Billington viewed *City Sugar* as being, in no uncertain terms, “full of genuine animus against the Brutalism of our provincial cities” (quoted in Nelson 81). And sociologist Fred Inglis, in the contemporary essay collection *The Black Rainbow – Notes On The Present Breakdown Of Culture*, lamented the dislocation wrought by road building, describing it as a “dismal contagion which spreads out from any such upheaval” (174). Both of these tendencies seem encoded in the characters of *Strawberry Fields* as much as any of the three plays discussed in this chapter.

Referenced by the author as a sort of “summer nightmare” (xiv) in his introduction to *Plays: One, Strawberry Fields* is a bleak but visceral play which articulates a powerful sense of ennui about the period, as well as being somewhat ambiguous and disengaged in its politics. Its two central characters are Charlotte and Kevin, the former in her early 20s, the latter in his early 30s, who are presented as meeting for the first time in a motorway café in the opening scene, about to embark on a mysterious trip, the point of which is initially kept from the audience. Both are frustrated idealists in different ways – Charlotte is seemingly a discontented, but very self-controlled middle Englander, originally from Kent, a “normal little rich girl” (51). Kevin, on the other hand, suffers from a terminal hangover after the unbridled optimism (and, seemingly, hedonism) of the 1960s – “when the Easy Rider bit goes badly sour” (26). He seems an LSD casualty of sorts – his tangential monologues are a recurrent device of Poliakov’s – and early on he bizarrely refers to himself as “going

blind...maybe" (6). Where Charlotte initially appears reserved and in control, Kevin always appears duty bound to let loose with his emotions. In the same opening scene, he fantasises to her about "when the holocaust comes and these places are all deserted and there are thistles growing on the motorway...and there's grass growing over the jukebox...and honeysuckle coming out of the expresso, yeah...and tadpoles swimming in the ladies" (8).

Kevin's relish at the prospect of pastoral revenge on modernity seems to be shared, albeit in a more restrained way, by Charlotte. But in the following scene, at another road rest stop, they encounter Nick, a hitchhiker who seems to represent a sort of Everyman. Nick, like any fan of human theatre, seems unwilling to let Kevin and Charlotte continue their travelling up the motorways alone, wishing to find out more about their trip's motivation. The play's climactic scene takes place on a Northumberland hillside, where Kevin begins to envisage a police showdown, leading to a potentially gruesome demise at the hands of cops who "shoot to kill" (47). Again, Nick assumes a mocking role, targeted particularly at Kevin's tendency to imagine a popular media "myth" emerging from their deaths. Charlotte composes a note in the possible event of their capture, outlining their philosophy and motives, which isn't revealed to the audience. Kevin takes in the sites and embarks on a nostalgic speech about a previous communal existence he enjoyed "all us together, here, building things, making things, living under this sky. Peacefully (49)". He contrasts this rather emotive evocation with the scene now – "the pool where we used to swim...rusted up, and filled in, full of filth" (49). It seems that Kevin conceives of the revolution, if there

is to be one, as reinvigorating the “shadows” (49) of his old hippy comrades, to wipe away “this appalling era”, referring to modernism, the 1970s and market capitalism in one vague swoop.

On the side of the road, as Kevin, Nick and Charlotte share boiled eggs and ice cream which “tastes a little of petrol” (10), Nick discovers his fellow travellers are bringing “pretty heavy” (12) political pamphlets with them. Kevin and Charlotte are members of a fringe extremist political group named the English People’s Party, with part of the manifesto (which Nick reads aloud) points to “pollution...urban wastelands...impersonal government...the mauling of the countryside” (12) as key facets of the state of Britain in 1976. Despite the sinister aspects to their political views, he continues to hitchhike with them, considering them relatively harmless cranks. Shortly after, a the meeting between the English People’s Party and a paranoid, disenfranchised housewife in her late 30s named Mrs Roberts (more on her later) occurs. She provides the itinerant agitators with some money (“£83 and 40 pence”, precisely – 18) and, strangely, an electroset and a roll of wire. At this point, the overall tone of the play gets progressively more tense, and Nick’s amusement at Charlotte and Kevin’s actions turns into an uneasy suspicion.

From the beginning of Act One, Scene Four, there is a palpable sense of eeriness – the setting, again, is a roadside this time in Doncaster. The scenery appears ever grimmer, consisting as it does of a derelict cinema with a hot dog van in the middle of the stage; Poliakoff’s stage directions interestingly specifying “the smell of onions” and “a pocket television flickering at the side of the van” (20). Kevin feels tense in this

context of mechanical decay, and hears a police siren in the distance (any impending criminal act is not described here, so the sense of uneasiness permeates); here Charlotte relates an anecdote to allay his fears:

It's all right. I saw a fire engine dash up a street in London not so long ago. It was two, three in the morning. All the streets were deserted, but it was roaring up them, screaming its head off, its siren was screaming. It came to this square and started going round and round in circles, making this extraordinary noise. I think they were just having a bit of fun, trying to wake people up. But nobody stirred. Nobody shouted. Nobody moved at all (20).

Whilst aiming to placate Kevin's anxieties, Charlotte's speech highlights the atmosphere of inner city disconnection. In the midst of a fire engine circling, producing such a cacophonous noise, one would expect some sort of shocked reaction, or surprise – even a simple noise to register recognition. Yet the response is inertia – no one stirring, no one moving. Nick's behaviour in this context becomes more erratic, more confrontational – his demeanour alters from a smug, somewhat detached amusement to crankily quizzing Charlotte as to the possibility of the absent hot dog man being an arms dealer. Pointedly, Kevin comments at this point that they are in “the middle of England” (22) – is this the median of contemporary experience? Kevin proceeds to describe thereafter his voracious consumption of cinema, which, in his view, exposed “the sort of madness...the whole sickness” (23) of contemporary society.

Further on the road by another motorway café with “rubbish vats in the background” (37), they encounter an unnamed “Kid” who seems to exemplify all that is wrong with contemporary British youth to Charlotte. Though only slightly younger than Charlotte, he is described in stage directions as “obviously been through a lot of drugs” (38), addicted to heroin, and earns a living seemingly as a male prostitute. His story-telling and over-familiarity serves to ratchet up Charlotte’s temper and she, for the first time, seems to lose control over her emotions – “you’re filthy, you revolt me” (40) – and, after the interloper leaves, Poliakoff employs an odd device. Music starts playing from the juke-box, continuing throughout the scene – the records aren’t specified, but they underscore Charlotte’s vitriolic rants against “the Left” and a prophesy of impending civil war. Whilst Poliakoff certainly portrays Charlotte as far-right, and points to the obvious dangers of such an all-encompassing, quasi-apocalyptic ideology, she and Kevin do represent at least some degree of idealism, albeit on an extreme level of hoping for a year zero Britain. By contrast, Nick’s role is of a sensible, but not particularly idealistic youth – his ambition is to become a teacher, but he doesn’t seem to even countenance any of the English People’s Party’s critique, even as it is obvious that a strong sense of ennui and decline is palpable throughout *Strawberry Fields*. Indeed, there is a sense of truth in the accusation that she levels at Nick, before going on to decry what, in her opinion, passes for modern life:

Everything’s been grey for so long, and the mess, everywhere, just totally grey.

(*She looks at him, quieter.*) Like you...This sprawling mess, those lights up

there, that savage light, have you ever seen something so horrible, anything so inhuman, more disgusting, it's just degrading...Do you know what used to be here – where we are now. DO YOU? A valley and fields. It did. How can people live with a dread of the future all the time. How can you bring people up like that – just offer them that all the time. Tell me. Somebody's got to do something (43-44).

His rejoinder is to call her “not very intelligent”, effectively unable to argue with her on the basis of her undoubtedly extreme but deeply held views.

Following from this, Robin Nelson seems to be correct in asserting that “rather than foregrounding political structures and organised movements, Poliakoff's *Strawberry Fields* picks up on the dangers which can arise from individuals' confusion when a progressive trajectory falters (108-109).” Thus, the English Peoples' Party's activism can be seen as a cry out amidst the cold stalemate of the aforementioned “summer nightmare” of 1976, in opposition to the silence of the greyness of contemporary England. All the while, random records play on, sound-tracking the most impassioned politicised statements of the play, and surely the pop music score is also an ironic counterpoint to the scene's climax – a violent brawl between the returning “Kid”, Kevin and Nick.

The most glaring aspect of this is the reference in the title. The John Lennon-penned ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’, released in 1967 as a double A-side single with ‘Penny Lane’, is widely considered one of the Beatles greatest and most iconic songs

(and the combined release of both tracks, indeed, as one of their most significant musical achievements). As well as being immensely popular (although missing out on the number one spot in the charts on its release to Englebert Humperdink), ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ is incredibly ambitious. In his seminal account of the Beatles’ recorded output *Revolution In The Head*, Ian MacDonald considered that it “extended the range of studio techniques developed on *Revolver*, opening up possibilities for pop which, given sufficient invention, could result in unprecedented sound images... a sort of technologically evolved folk music (175).” In this context, ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ could be considered to be a far-reaching example of pop music modernism. Lyrically, the song is a nostalgic evocation of Lennon’s childhood in Liverpool, and also a partial reflection of his own immersion at the time in psychedelic drugs – retreating into a prelapsarian idyll with “nothing to get hung about, Strawberry Fields Forever.” Considering these two key aspects of the song, one can see how Poliakoff could use it to both ironic but also quite serious effect. Firstly, in terms of its music, the tune reflects Lennon and The Beatles’ ambition and adventurousness in its scope – using to the full the studio technology available at the time and underpinned by a sense of the possibilities of the popular song.

Also, MacDonald’s reference here to folk music is important, as it seems to reconcile the tension felt at the time between the residual folk movement and the rock/pop orthodoxy which succeeded it. In *The Black Rainbow* as part of a vituperative essay on the ills of late 1960s and early 1970s popular music, Charles Parker, in one of his few positive sentiments on the future potentiality of pop states that “the very electronic



tools...made possible the creation of works springing from the people at their still vigorous linguistic and ethnic roots”(167). He is, in this context, referring to an ethnographic sort of folk-song collecting, but clearly MacDonald believes that The Beatles had already achieved this in 1966/1967.

This further underlines the almost utopian ideal of song exemplified in this song; Poliakov would no doubt have been aware of the significance of this song in popular culture, and to render it ironic by using it to title a play in great part about “the hippy dream turning sour” (*Plays:1*, xiv). Additionally, the nostalgic nature lyrics of the tune add a more serious note to Poliakov’s reference. Looking back to a pastoral English idyll along with a disturbing de-anchoring of the perception (“nothing is real”), the song’s juxtaposition of acid-tinged disturbance and nostalgic detachment seems reflected by the duality of Charlotte and Kevin’s dissension against the dominant culture of the mid 1970s as they see it. If ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ can be said to be slyly re-appropriated in this way, the Beach Boys reference in Act 1 could be a similar move by Poliakov. As Kevin and Charlotte wait in the motorway diner (unnamed, but most likely the Watford Gap) about to set off on their own, inverted Magical Mystery Tour, Kevin decides to put on “a nostalgic Beach Boys standard” to “get us travelling well” (*Strawberry Fields*, 9). Known even more for their ebullient positivity than The Beatles, in this setting the song seems oddly. Kevin quickly decides to leave, seemingly realising his error, whilst Charlotte’s nonplussed reaction to the tune is almost an intimation that she’s well aware that their trip should not be soundtracked by the Beach Boys.

Muzak (i.e piped in, repetitive, unobtrusive easy-listening music) appears again and again in the sound directions for *Strawberry Fields*, just as it does in *Hitting Town*. As Natasha Barrett notes, “*muzak* plays on passive reception to encourage us in some other activity (236)”, not calling attention to its self but thereby promoting engagement with whatever may be at hand. Yet if muzak is so pervasive in contexts where there is little else to do but wait, it functions to sedate and calm its listeners. Juxtaposed with the criminal conspiracies and activities of the play’s main characters, muzak is thus made into something hilarious – an ambient, passive soundtrack to a group (and those around them) devoted to destroying the existing condition of British society! Minimalism could be said to be a less commercial relation of muzak. In his excellent history of 20th century music *The Rest Is Noise*, Alex Ross references Robert Fink in noting that:

Minimalism often mimics the sped-up, numbed-out repetitions of consumer culture, the incessant iteration of commercial jingles on TV. But...the minimalists deliver a kind of silent critique of the world as it is. They locate depth in surfaces, slowness in rapid motion (511).

Repetition in minimalism, following this critique, implicitly focuses attention on the functions of a world which is itself based on repetition. Thus, it challenges the listener to be more aware of the banal and even deleterious of their surrounding environment; if muzak has in any way a relationship with this musical form, then it could legitimately be viewed as amplifying the tensions existent in the world of the motorway rest-stops. Even more pertinent to this idea of amplifying awareness is the

aforementioned use of a “loud electronic buzz” closing out Act One and ushering in Act Two. Not only is it a conventionally unpleasant sound, and, indeed, somewhat related to other incidental electronic noises such as the drone of a faulty electric light, but it also serves as a bold underlining of the violence which has just occurred. The absence of noise – conversely - has an eerie, almost supernatural quality:

NICK: Why is the whole fucking place deserted? The hot dog stand, the urinals, it's a fucking ghost town, the whole place has stopped breathing. Where is everybody?

CHARLOTTE (*starting straight at him*): They're all indoors watching television probably. (*At him:*) Aren't they? (25)

This evocation is immediately reminiscent of ‘London’s Burning’ by The Clash, one of their most abrasive early songs. “London’s burning with boredom now” growls singer/guitarist Joe Strummer on The Clash’s first album, released in 1977, echoing Charlotte’s sentiments: “black or white, turn it on, face the new religion, Everybody's sitting 'round watching television!” Articulated within the boundaries of a distorted, noisy pop song and at just over two minutes long, there is more concision and forcefulness in Strummer’s variation on the theme. Yet both sentiments come from the same place. Poliakoff’s play coincides, more or less, with the emergence of The Clash; both Poliakoff and Strummer were born in 1952. Both seem to be articulating a sense of an emergent culture within a complex “structure of feeling” (Williams, 64-65), and thus key development in British musical and literary culture were born.

It is interesting to note also that Joe Strummer identified The Clash's music as "the sound of the Westway", a city motorway in London which "became a symbol for youthful alienation and inner-city grunge" (Moran, 215). There is also a clear line to be drawn between the sentiments expressed by Kevin and that of perhaps the most iconic British punk act, The Sex Pistols. Jon Savage, in his cultural history of the emergence of punk rock in Britain *England's Dreaming*, identifies one of the key traits of the Pistols. "One definition of nihilism is that it is not the negative or cynical rejection of belief but the positive courage to live without it: the Sex Pistols and their supporters were an explosion of negatives (195)". Lyrics such as 'Wanna Be Me's "give me World War Three, we can live again" are in touch with Kevin's expressions of excitement at the impending apocalypse. Also, the stripping back of so-called "progressive" pop musical forms by punk also resonates with Savage's definition of nihilism – to remove unnecessary and extraneous elements to create a "year zero" environment, which, despite its fascist connotations, in artistic terms could feed an undeniably positive explosion of possibilities. There was also, on the one hand, the sense that Simon Reynolds identifies in *Rip It Up And Start Again* of punk's "sheer monstrous *evil* (xii - italics in original)" as a key element of its appeal, but on the other hand, of its paving the way for bands to approach music with more freedom to experiment. Reynolds, again, sees the "post-punk" period as far more musically interesting than punk, though its "astonishing experimentation with lyrical and vocal technique (xiii)" would have arguably not happened without the breaking down of barriers which punk achieved.

Common to both *City Sugar* and *Strawberry Fields* (but less so in *Hitting Town*) are the cryptic stories that are delivered to the audience by secondary characters. In both plays, these seem to function as strange snapshots of 1970s cultural ennui. In the former, Nicola Davies' friend Susan has an intriguing and disturbing account of hitchhiking back to Leicester from a Yellow Tops concert in Coventry. Firstly she describes the procession of lorry drivers on the roads, all disinclined to give her a lift, with each and every lorry eerily emitting the voice of *City Sugar*'s dj anti-hero: "They all had their radios on. Yes! I could hear. It was Leonard Brazil. It was. He was coming from every single lorry. But none of them stopped" (159). Eventually, she is picked up, but right away she is consumed by a paranoid fantasy of what might happen to her:

I knew he was going to try to kill me then, yes, on the motorway, in the dark, on the side, where nobody could see, you know, get me on my back and jam a stick of lipstick down my throat, and I'd heard Leonard Brazil on the radio, and suddenly it'd stop, and I'd be dead, and they'd find me in pieces like this...in a bundle, in the mud, been assaulted, flies in my eyes, and all that. And pictures of me on the telly, flies in my eyes, and wrapped in a sheet, you know. But nothing did happen. Nothing at all...*I wanted it to.* (159)

Perhaps one of the most shocking part of this monologue is that her death wish elicits no response from her friend Nicola. It is not followed up on - is her desire to die motivated by the posthumous newspaper "fame" that might result? Is it that she considers her life to be not worth living? All the same, it has a profoundly alienating effect, along with her other reminiscence about that same Yellow Tops concert. The

following image of a crying policeman was apparently her strongest memory of the experience:

That same time, by the place, I was walking along, and I saw this policeman, he wasn't very old for a policeman, he can't have been that old, he was standing in a doorway, I saw him, he was all by himself and he was swearing his head off, he was, with his teeth kind of clenched. And he had water in his eyes, he was crying...(ibid)

In *Strawberry Fields*, the characters of Mrs Roberts and the Cleaner are notable for the melancholic, anecdotal and occasionally bizarre nature of their discourse. Each tangent allows the audience a strange, off-kilter snapshot of 1970s cultural ennui. The first to appear is Mrs Roberts, a supporter of the English People's Party. She tangentially begins to tell the three a story about a teacher at the comprehensive named "Mr Godfrey... he's a very clever man, he feels thing strongly...it's nice isn't it to meet somebody that feels things strongly, instead of just muddle (16)." She arranges to meet him at the hyper-modern service station for a clandestine meeting (for what, she does not say, but it is fair to guess that she may be having an affair). After this, Mr Godfrey doesn't turn up. In desperation, Mrs Roberts attempts to phone him, and but because the phones 15 out of the 18 phones are out of order protests by leaving them all off their receivers. They "made this really terrible whining noise, nearly blows your head off you know – like a scream almost" (17). The image of a respectable housewife cracking in this ways is humorous, but also pointed – facing the facts of mechanised detachment, and a lack of empathy from the service station staff, Mrs Roberts

effectively screams out in frustration by ironically manipulating useless inventions against themselves. The desire for connection, phrased in such naïve terms for a person in their late 30s, is also quite touching – even though Mrs Roberts is a “crank” (Nick’s words) and incredibly paranoid (of bombs concealed in radiators, for one) she is, at the same time, portrayed as humanly pathetic.

Then there is the figure of the “bedraggled, overtired” Cleaner, double jobbing as a waitress in the dirty all-night Doncaster café the trio find themselves in after the murder of Taylor (29). She tells a bizarre anecdote whilst serving them about a lorry driver with his pants and trousers down who came in “few nights ago” (30):

He was so drunk, he couldn’t see a foot in front of him and he sat down, sort of singing quiet to himself, he had a high voice, and all the time he was doing it down his leg...you know. He was quite good looking you know, but he couldn’t really move (ibid).

In contrast to the sombre atmosphere amidst Kevin, Charlotte and Nick, her bawdy recollection is both absurd and slightly disturbing – also, her “doing it down his leg” remark foreshadows Nick’s pointing out that Charlotte has the blood of Taylor dripping down her legs. The observation itself is also odd – it doesn’t seem the most obvious thing to relate when describing a blind drunk lorry driver in an extremely undignified state. The Cleaner goes on to describe her own sense of alienation in her employment; she is another disenfranchised character, albeit only encountered in passing. She’s a local and can remember the road being built, so is aware of the town’s

previous culture at some level, and her comments on the detached nature of much of the café's visitors hits home: "it's funny you know, people look at you in here, they're amazed you can talk...yes, that there's something going on in your head after all..."

(31). Clearly glad (she smiles as she speaks her mind) to have someone to talk to, even to those who are obviously preoccupied, she articulates the same poignant dislocation common to any menial workers within the context of a transient culture – she is thought to be merely a fixture, without consciousness or feeling. The conversation is ended after her down-to-earth observations begin to jar with the incredibly anxious and paranoid Kevin, who screams at her to leave their table.

## Conclusion

Raymond Williams writes in *Marxism And Literature* of his concept of a structure of feeling that it is a "practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity" (132). As cultural and historical forces cannot be separated out from art-works, so cultural artefacts in a given era are collectively imbued with this "practical consciousness", regardless of whether these works are from a conventionally "high" or "low" cultural background. Drama critic Martin Priestman felt that the "aggression of punk" (289) was hinted at somewhat in Poliakoff's 1975 plays *Hitting Town* and *City Sugar*, but neglected to reference *Strawberry Fields*. Yet it seems pretty distinctly felt in the play, which is frequently punctuated by verbal or



physical violence. Robin Nelson, in his book-length critique of Poliakoff's career, suggests that the play may have been prescient in identifying a definite lurch to the right in British politics – I'm not convinced by this, mainly because of the eco/environmental element to the English People's Party. More accurately, and perhaps a tad grandiosely, Howard Devoto, the pioneering Mancunian punk and post-punk musician and wit, in an interview with Michael Bracewell, retrospectively said that "punk rock was a new version of trouble-shooting modern forms of unhappiness" (25). Reflecting the common consciousness within differing art-forms, the same could be said of Poliakoff's trio of mid 1970s plays - *Hitting Town*, *City Sugar* and *Strawberry Fields*, with their decaying town centres and roadsides, cynical DJs, alienated peoples, and the pervasive, persistent buzz of a post-industrial, and post-1960s, hangover.

## Chapter 8 – No Future/No Alternative

In the following passage from his history of countercultural London, long-standing music writer and cultural critic Barry Miles identified the huge popular significance and impact of punk music on late 1970s British culture:

It is axiomatic that the true character of a culture, the state of its national consciousness, can be glimpsed through a nation's popular music, television shows and tabloid newspapers. In the post-war period there was never such a division as the one between the punks and the cultural establishment in the late seventies. The punks exposed the barely restrained violence beneath the British stiff upper lip; the repressed rage of the 'flog 'em, bring back hanging' old ladies delicately sipping their tea in Bexhill-on-sea and Windsor; the roiling and daily disappointments of the robot-like millions commuting into the City of London each day to make millions for foreign bosses and anonymous shareholders; the blatant hypocrisy of the Fleet Street newspapers, suppressing and distorting facts to suit the political objectives of their millionaire owners; the cynical manipulation of children and the poor by the pony-tailed advertising men of Charlotte Street - one punk band had a song about champagne party held to celebrate the launch of individual fish-finger packs for pensioners - the steady diet of murder, murder, murder in films and

television drama, and, in the seventies, still the puritan admonitions against sex (*London Calling* 371).

Though perhaps somewhat hyperbolic, Miles points to the political implications of the nascent punk rock culture and the critique of society embedded within it – particularly in opposition to the deference towards authority still in evidence in Britain, as well as the nation's latent puritanism. Specifically, it stands in sharp contrast with the “cultural establishment” - but only insofar as its novelty allowed. In this chapter, I want to look at the rise of punk rock music and culture in Britain in the late 1970s, particularly The Sex Pistols, as well as the punk scenes in London, primarily, and Manchester secondarily. Specifically the period to be focused here is between 1976 to 1978, due to it being the period when the Sex Pistols began recording/touring more extensively, and up until the point when they disintegrated; punk's initial energy became somewhat codified in terms of a recognisable and marketable subcultural style. As Penman has written – in relation to mod, but also applicable to punk and other subcultures - “what began as a principled refusal of the nine-to-five wage-slave grind found its most vivid street-level expression in avid consumerism” (25). London and Manchester are also key locations for my subsequent chapters, particularly in the respective cases of The Fall and The Smiths, both products in some sense of a Mancunian musical and cultural milieu. Whilst The Fall seem to retain a defiant provincialism, there is a particular sense that, for The Smiths, the pull and glamour of the capital city contains a similar allure to that which ensnared the hero of *Billy Liar*.

Punk seems to embody, most of all, the cynic sensibility at this point in history. As described in the previous chapter, there are intriguing crossovers between the sensibility evident in the almost contemporaneous drama of Stephen Poliakoff's, for instance, and the nascent punk scene. Residual elements of older musics - for example, the influence of the more outré end of progressive rock on the likes of Johnny Rotten, as well as his apparent debt to Ian Dury (Miles 348) - remained. Progressive rock itself did not die out - evidenced by the continued popularity of Yes, Genesis etc; its new found unfashionability arguably caused a displacement of certain prog values into the art rock of Brian Eno and the Art Bears, for instance. although it became less fashionable. But punk did point to a different model of music-making, elevating the amateur to an extent which would have been unthinkable in the earlier part of the 1970s. And in contrast to Miles's categorization of punk's anti-establishment edge, the form had at its core a politically ambiguous stance, pointing the way towards a markedly more individualistic "post-ideological" 1980s. Thus, its influence - in oblique or overt terms - was reflected in slick popular music, the Socialist Worker's Party endeavour Rock Against Racism, the rise of independent labels/distribution; even in the case of Margaret Thatcher, and Thatcherism itself.

Peter Shelley, co-founder and singer/guitarist in pioneering Manchester punk band The Buzzcocks, identifies here the Bohemian freedoms inherent in the punk rock explosion:

People were throwing in all these ideas. It wasn't only the freedom to make the music you wanted, but it was also that other people with other ideas were

coming in. It was like going to college. People were being Bohemian rather than trying to conform. (quoted in Savage 298)

Quite apart from the nihilism which coincided with the rise and fall of Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious (who seemed to take the sense of a cult of youth in The Who's 'My Generation' far too literally), punk represented a negation only in order to be followed by an opening up of possibilities. As Albiez described the first Sex Pistols gig at the Lesser Free Trade Hall in Manchester on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1976 – a gig promoted by the Buzzcocks, and famous for the apparently illustrious array of (future) Manchester indie musicians in attendance:

For many in the audience, it was probably easier to imagine joining the string section of the Halle Orchestra, than to envisage themselves as competent enough to join even the low-key college circuit. In contrast, the Sex Pistols' performance was fundamentally shocking, leaving many of the audience open-mouthed, if generally appreciative (97).

The perhaps innocuously tight support band from the "low-key college circuit" serves as a warning to would-be performers – don't (even attempt to) try this at home. By contrast, The Sex Pistols served as a shocking spectacle, but with the implication that such a display might not be out of the realms of possibility for the musically untutored or inept. Albiez also explains the reason for The Sex Pistols' transcending of the North/South divide:

The Sex Pistols appealed to 'youth-like' impatience with the perceived impotence of provincial life, across classes and age groups. Within this impatience with defeat, a strong emotional investment in cultural phenomena that expressed the malaise of post-industrial northern life was, paradoxically, a release from it (100).

Yet there were practical reasons alongside philosophical or idealistic ones for the opportunities which opened up to punk rock groups in the late 1970s. The view of the 1960s as characterised by excess was promulgated by Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons in their polemical 1978 tract *"The Boy Looked At Johnny"*. 1960s icons such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Cream had become bloated by their successes, and - articulated in no uncertain terms by Burchill and Parsons - "artistic pretension became self-parody as working-class heroes became cocaine tax-exiles" (17). Punks took more of an inspiration from the less hippyish acts of the 1960s, those who were considerably more niche and obscure. In America, these were found more often than not on the East coast than the West. Chief among these for frequency of being cited as an influence were Lou Reed's The Velvet Underground, their first album establishing a proto-punk template with "paeans to urban paranoia, smack glorification, and sado-masochism" (24).

Yet it was the influence of the pre-punk Pub Rock scene which generated the infrastructure, in London at least, for a network of less monied, unsigned bands to use:

The venues created by the aural movement remained and grass-roots rock combos had a ready made gig-circuit training ground in London for their lean years of apprenticeship. It was no longer uncool for a band to climb on stage without a P.A system the size of a Lassky's warehouse (26).

Values were changing, and excess was no longer a byword for musical or artistic quality. Dave Laing identifies this tendency towards technological "gigantism" as Dave Laing terms it in *One Chord Wonders* was a result of the obsession, in the wake of The Beatles and other pioneers in the field of studio recording, with recreating L.Ps as accurately as possible in a live context. In the early 1970s:

Live shows were increasingly expected to provide an exact recreation...and therefore demanded large investments in extra musicians or various pieces of electronic equipment...Three-minute songs seemed unsuitable to the opulence and grandeur of the studio machinery and the musicians' ability to demonstrate virtuosity on guitar or keyboards (3).

Laing, like Burchill and Parsons, also recognised the significant influence of Pub Rock on the British music scene: "virtually all the bands shared a commitment to some idea of musical 'roots', without succumbing to the purism about recreating the past that had been such a feature of the British R&B movement" (8). Whether the original R&B boom recognised the fact of the absurdity of attempting to recreate blues music as British students of the form is uncertain. At any rate, bands like Dr Feelgood, as the name might imply, were not especially concerned with putting across a pretentious

muso image to their audience; playing noisy rock and roll was enough. I would suggest that the connection to the past lingers in punk music, though perhaps overshadowed by the sense of aggression inherent in its packaging and presentation - “no future” does not need imply “no past”. Nods by The Sex Pistols to their predecessors with covers of ‘Louie, Louie’ (originally by the Kingsmen), ‘No Fun’ (originally by The Stooges) and Glen Matlock’s self-admittedly Beatles-indebted songwriting all bore some conception of musical roots, though now contextualised within a youth movement far more abrasive and self-consciously hideous *looking* than any before.

Likewise, Laing identifies the emergent cultural role of pioneering, pub rock promoters-cum-labels such as Chiswick and Stiff Records as prefiguring the Do-It-Yourself ethic of punk record labels (9). Independent labels - in theory, at least - compensated for the lack of financing for recording/advances with a more freeform approach to creative work, allowing bands to indulge themselves creatively without being overly preoccupied with ideas of commercial viability. The idea of personal reinvention was a key aspect of the punk rock explosion as it happened. John Lydon became ‘Johnny Rotten’; John Ritchie became ‘Sid Vicious’; Marianne Joan Elliott-Said became ‘Poly Styrene’. Stewart Home has drawn attention in *The Assault On Culture* to the connections between the pseudonyms of mail art and that of punk (81). An earlier precursor to this sort of fashion/musical/personality reinvention was the phenomenon of the Teddy Boys. Nik Cohn describes the experience of seeing the Teds for the first time on the streets of his hometown of Derry:



What was it about the Teds? Swagger, and wildness, yes, and something else, which stirred me even more deeply - the force of self-invention. By every rule of birth - religion, politics, economics - these boys were losers. Papist scum, with no future or hope. But that wasn't the way they carried themselves. To me, they looked like stars, transformed and made heroic by the power of Little Richard: rock & roll. (Cohn, xi)

The heroic self-reinvention inherent in this kind of youth movement highlights the power of a musical subculture, or indeed a work of art, to enliven and to elevate the prospects of its consumers. In the context of punk rock, referring to the reappropriation of objects such as safety pins by punks, Dick Hebdige writes of how,

These 'humble objects' can be magically appropriated; 'stolen' by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination. Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', *which contradicts the myth of consensus*" (18 – my italics).

Hebdige seems to take the liberatory potential of punk style very seriously, and a sense of empowerment was no doubt key to its appeal. Yet the quasi-mystical discourse employed seems excessive, proclaiming a naïve belief in the potentiality of

consumer goods to enact magical consequences. Contradicting the myth of consensus has its appeal, of course – but did punk fashion really signify this? If so, was this move toward individualistic fragmentation a noble sort of rebellion? Or was it merely reflecting emergent atomisation that was set to happen anyway? Stanley Cohen – a key influence on Hebdige and the development of subcultural theory – specifically criticised this tendency towards the over-extrapolation of convoluted meanings gleaned from both punk rock and fashion gestures:

My feeling is that the symbolic baggage the kids are being asked to carry is just too heavy, that the interrogations are just a little forced. This is especially so when appearances are, to say the least, ambiguous or (alternatively) when they are simple, but taken to point to just their opposite (xv).

Conversely, a parallel elevation of self-destruction, nihilism and excess in punk rock is also in evidence. Exemplified for legendary rock critic Lester Bangs in the grim decline and death of Rocket From The Tombs/early Pere Ubu guitarist Peter Laughner, Peter “at least in part died because he wanted to be Lou Reed (221)”; the sense that he wanted to push his own hedonism and self-destruction to such a heroic point from which there was no return - reinvention as Lou Reed was a dead end. In terms of American punk rock - where the term itself was originated, from Lester Bangs and Legs McNeil’s *Punk* ‘zine alike - Laughner represented a turning point:

For Pere Ubu, Laughner's death marked a change in direction from 'the destructive illusions essential to certain popular Rock and art aesthetics' to 'a disciplined, pragmatic optimism' (David Thomas, quoted in Savage 441).

An early, tragic and Romantic death was thus, for a certain branch of American punk, no longer a desirable conclusion. Sid Vicious certainly didn't receive the memo. One of the less overtly nihilistic of the Sex Pistols - lead vocalist/lyric writer Johnny Rotten - delivered two of the strongest, almost evangelical mission statements for the punk movement: "Anarchy In The U.K" and "God Save The Queen". 'Anarchy In The U.K' was advocating the bringing down of the structure of British society in a three-minute pop single; in this sense, it had to seem revolutionary. The tools of the revolution are not entirely pragmatic - "I use the NME, I use anarchy"; thus refusal in the context of the song seems pretty ad hoc. The sense of extolling the virtues of anarchy seems like a reflection of some of the directionless rebellion inherent in characters like *Hitting Town's* Ralph. Probably the preeminent punk band from Manchester at this time, The Buzzcocks carried themselves with a much more palpable sense of the absurd than The Sex Pistols. They were funnier, more daft, less menacing, and more inclined to write love songs than extolling the virtues of anarchy and destruction. Syncing up musically more with their fellow North-westerners The Fall and The Smiths, the Buzzcocks were far more into romance than their fellow punk rock travellers. Their self-released *Spiral Scratch* E.P, whilst pointing the way towards an independent means of recording and distribution, was also a firm statement of punk rock principles - repetition, irony, self-consciously crude or obvious riffs, and a blank pose,

exemplified particularly on original singer Howard Devoto's song 'Boredom'. Katie Milestone argues for the significance of Manchester punk culture for fostering a sense of regional independence, versus the economic and political domination of a certain town in the south-east of England. From the late 1970s onwards,

Manchester and other provincial cities increasingly began to reject the authority of London as the sole British site of pacesetting cultural innovation. There was a rebellion against mainstream culture as well as a negotiation of the spatialization of this resistance (99-100).

There was little direct engagement with the mainstream political spectrum in the initial explosion of British punk rock. More preoccupied with a nihilistic refusal than an acceptance, some original punks would later espouse overtly left-wing, activist ideas (Billy Bragg), others far-right (Skrewdriver), and others thinking politics to be something left to stereotypical student types (Sham 69). Miles identifies the Rock Against Racism as rising out of punk rock culture - responding to virulent, racist political ramblings by the former god of blues Eric Clapton, Red Saunders sought to organize "a rank and file movement against the racist poison in music" (quoted in Miles, 373). This posited a "contrast between the reactionary old hippy millionaire going on about 'bastard wogs' while ripping off their licks, and the energetic young punks onstage, spreading a message of tolerance and goodwill" (ibid). Yet the vacuum of The Sex Pistols was filled by other ideologies. The implicit politics of punk music, though perhaps more anarchic and libertarian in character generally, found itself

easily adopted by elements of the New Right, or what would later be termed as “neo-liberalism”. As Jon Savage writes in *England's Dreaming*:

The very freedom which Punk had not only sung about, but enacted in every possible sense, was now hijacked by the New Right to mean something quite different: an inequality that was not only institutionalized but installed as a ruling cultural and social principle (541).

Liberating the individual meant dismantling “big government” in this context, and allowing private wealth and enterprise to flourish was in many ways Margaret Thatcher’s *raison d’être* as a politician. Remove the strictures of the state and everyone has the opportunity to prosper - in this context, the do-it-yourself ethos of punk assumed a strange foreshadowing of the fetishising of the self-made man. Stuart Hall analysed this phenomenon in his essay 'The Meaning Of New Times' – 'New Times' referring to an emergent (in the early 1980s) shift in the structure of Western economies away from older, Keynesian economic consensus and into a condition he termed 'Post-Fordism'. A key characteristic of this condition is “more flexi-time and part-time working”, as well as

Emergence of new patterns of social divisions – especially those between 'public' and 'private' sectors and between the two-thirds who have rising expectations and the 'new poor' and underclasses of the one-third that is left behind on every significant dimension of social opportunity...it also signals greater social fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective

solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities as well as the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption (118-119).

Interestingly, in Jonathan Coe's 2001 novel *The Rotter's Club*, set in the 1970s against the backdrop of IRA violence on the British mainland, the crumbling of the post-World War Two political/economic consensus and the rise of punk versus the decline of prog rock, the unsympathetic younger brother of main character Ben Trotter exultantly sings the "no future" refrain of the Pistols' "God Save The Queen" in response to Thatcher's 1979 election victory. This is all the more pointed a scene, given that the selfishness and crassness of Colin Trotter (who later becomes a New Labour politician, in to *The Rotter's Club* sequel *The Closed Circle*) is contrasted with the idealistic and somewhat naive nature of Ben's progressive rock fan.

Savage continues:

If it had been the project of the Sex Pistols to destroy the music industry, then they had failed; but as they gave it new life, they allowed a myriad of new forms to become possible. When Punk entered the music and media industries, its vision of freedom was eventually swamped by New-Right power politics and the accompanying value systems, but its original, gleeful negation remains a beacon (541).

Thus, here is the identifiable paradox at the heart of punk - its nihilistic refusal of what was seen to be the mainstream music industry was quickly absorbed into it, yet

its original 'rebellion' (as such) brought forth far more opportunities for streams of hitherto marginalized and excluded artists. Stewart Home underlined the uncertainty in punk's general political outlook, in large part due to its emphasis on vitality: "Punk was a politics of energy with a bias towards expressing itself in the rhetoric of the left, but which more than occasionally assumed the voice of right (81)." Thus, whilst left-wing or anti-establishment ideas were often thrown own, this was by no means a definitive base of a more coherent political ideology. Home also considers the comparative paucity of political engagement in the punk era versus the late 1960s - its more niche, subcultural appeal apparently saw to that:

The *youth underground* of the late seventies - centred on punk - was far weaker (in terms of the broadness of its social base) than that of the sixties, in that its existence was dependent on rock music in a way that the more *heavily politicised* underground of a decade earlier was not. In retrospect, punk also appears as a very straightforward progression from the sixties, whereas at the time it was perceived as a break. The entourage around the Sex Pistols - in particular - appears to be little more than a copy of the milieu attracted to Warhol's factory (84).

Whilst I agree to a point on the subject of punk's progression from the 1960s, I don't think it's entirely worthwhile to dismiss the moment as being so extensively indebted to its predecessors. Certainly there are connections to be made between the two eras - the emphasis on guru-like thinkers, intent on theorising youth culture as it happened (Malcolm McLaren/Warhol), the iconoclastic leaders of groups who, intentionally or

not, found themselves in the role of seer or a voice of a generation (Johnny Rotten/John Lennon), or the significance of fashion within the realms of the respective phenomena. But a point that Home doesn't really address is the obvious fact that the failure of the late 1960s to enact great cultural and revolutionary change still lingers with the punk generation. The late 1970s generation is also fighting against the cultural totems of the 1960s, in some way or another - as The Clash sang, "no Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones, in 1977." The lyric is more about putting an embargo on these three, rather than lamenting their absence from pop cultural relevance.

In terms of punk's relationship with ideas of gender equality, there were certainly elements through which women were able to be more active, willing participants in the processes of rock culture. X-Ray Spex's Poly Styrene and The Rezillos' Fay Fife were early punk avatars of female singers who were also songwriters, although undoubtedly far more active groups formed in the post-punk era. Majority female bands such as London's The Raincoats and Delta 5 from Leeds were songwriters as well as musicians. Nonetheless, the gender trouble of punk was analyzed by Dave Laing:

Punk songs had sidestepped the issue [of sexism and gender relations] by turning away from lyrics of sentimentality, but the performance of male artists generally showed an uncritical adherence to standard styles which emphasised macho postures. In complete contrast, most of the best-known female punk musicians set themselves to undermine the conventional performing roles



provided as models by mainstream popular music. The contrast was underlined by the fact here the conservatism of male punk style was supported by one of its supposedly radical dimensions. For the image and ethos of working-classness adopted by punk as a 'realist' music was very much that of the aggressive male adolescent, an ethos which produced the pogo as well as the stage choreography of The Clash and The Stranglers (97-98).

Subverting traditional ideas of women's role in rock culture is, in this context, a potent gesture aimed at refusing male hegemony, particularly in the context of 'hard man' posturing that arguably proliferated at punk gigs post-1977. In terms of fashion, self-consciously presenting oneself as unconventional and abnormal in appearance could be subversive. However, this did not necessarily ameliorate the essentially misogynist tendencies (as discussed by Burchill & Parsons) in groups such as The Stranglers, and in the genre of roots reggae – a form actively promoted by bands such as The Clash.

Punk's relationship with situationism - mainly drawn from the theorising of Malcolm McLaren - has been a factor in making sense of the form, in large part due to writings of Jon Savage on the subject in *England's Dreaming*. I have chosen to look at the essay 'Totality For Kids' by a key member of the Situationist International Raoul Vaneigem, originally published in the *International Situationist* nos. 7-8 from 1962 to 1963 (reprinted in *Leaving The 20th Century*), and analyse some of its relationship to punk rock culture. Vaneigem identifies the timing of a revolutionary movement as when "all that reality presents' finds its immediate *representation*. For the rest of the time, hierarchical power, always more distant from its magical and mystical regalia,

endeavours to make everyone forget that the totality (no more than reality!) exposes its imposture" (39). Thus, revolution is, to the Situationists, a raising of consciousness. The sense of the pointlessness of present-day conventional political engagement is dealt with when the author writes of the politics of the Cold War; i.e the Soviet state socialism versus western capitalism dichotomy. Vaneigem has no support whatever for either, and sees the existence of these two totalizing systems as mutually beneficial to their existence: "gangsters can get on very well with one another, despite their spectacular divergences" (39); world politics is equated with the wars over turf that petty criminals participate in. The primacy of private property in capitalist society is criticised, and this is indeed something which the punk youth culture seems to kick against, denigrating symbols of respectability, dressing provocatively, and engaging in graffiti:

Valid for everyone, justified in everyone's eyes by divine law or natural reason, the right of privative appropriation is objectified in general illusion, in a universal transcendence, in an essential law under which everyone, individually, manages to tolerate the limits assigned to his own right to live and to the conditions of life in general (41).

Vaneigem hits on some of the key destructive/creative impetus behind revolutionary acts; one can extrapolate somewhat beyond this and extend this kind of idea into the realm of punk rock culture (interestingly, in this context, he connects the revolt of the slaves against their oppressors with Swedish so-called "hooligans" and spontaneous, illegal striking):

Destruction - (the) sublime moment when the complexity of the world becomes tangible, transparent, within everyone's grasp, revolts for which there can be no expiation - those of the slaves, of the *Jacques*, of the iconoclasts, of the *Enragés*, of the *Fédérés*, of Kronstadt, of Asturias, and - a promise of things to come - the hooligans of Stockholm and the wildcat strikes...Only the destruction of all hierarchical power will allow us to forget these. We intend to make sure that it does (41).

The last quote I will look at here is one of the most significant - again, it seems to go against a sense of crass materialism within capitalist society. It also seems to further underline the destructive possibilities inherent in the punk form; "to be rich today is to possess the greatest number of impoverished objects" (41). The possession of objects, of course, is the *raison d'être* for the vinyl collector, or any collector for that matter. To reject this kind of accumulation, to live a spare, minimalist existence without frills, is thus a reaction against the material domination of people's lives by clutter. Thus, punk is an affirmation of stripping down material excess - an oppositional gesture against an existence centred around, crudely put, shopping and fucking.

Malcolm McLaren's influential role in helping to foster punk rock as an idea/aesthetic, the influence of Situationism on his thought, as well as the interaction with popular forms:

The libertarian currents of the late 1960s shaped the lives of many of those that they touched: for Malcolm McLaren and his associates like Fred Vermorel and Jamie Reid, life would never be the same. In those currents they could swim, and select a language for their multiple angers, resentments and ideals. It was largely through the SI (Situationist International)'s influence that they developed a taste for a new media practice - manifestos, broadsheets, montages, pranks, disinformation - which would give form to their gut feeling that things could be moved, if not irreversibly changed (Savage 36).

Situationism's use of cross-cultural collage pointed the way towards an artistic expression that would ridicule and attack popular culture using its own raw materials, with the tools of parody, irony and pastiche. Detournement - a Situationist concept devoted to subverting an existing idea or image by manipulating it to give it a radically different meaning - was in evidence in the Jamie Reid sleeve designs for the Sex Pistols. McLaren's conception of the band as "noble savages" can lead to viewing their actions as, to some degree, the production of outsider artists. As Colin Rhodes writes of the term, it is bound up with issues of authenticity and realness in expression:

In orthodox notions of Outsider Art the status of the artist as cultural outsider is a vouchsafe for the 'purity' of the art, because the detachment of the creator proves the absence of deviousness or cynical manipulation of fashionable taste in the work on his or her part (16).

Yet the connections between punk and other concepts in British culture cannot be understated. Stewart Home in *The Assault On Culture* identifies the connections between punk rock in Britain and the Mail Art movement, a democratising move in the art world designed, in part, to subvert the fact that all letters sent by the Royal Mail are technically the property of the Queen. To play with this technicality, mail artists would send self-consciously obscene and grotesque images and writings through the post - this, in fact, brought about the prosecution and conviction of mail artist (and later Throbbing Gristle/Psychic T.V bandleader) Genesis P. Orridge in 1976 (71):

The influence of mail *art* was most strongly felt in the choice of *bizzare* (sic) stage names. The iconoclastic nature of punk *identities* (i.e Johnny Rotten, Sid Vicious, Siouxsie Sioux, Dee Generate and Captain Sensible) echo the assumed names of mail artists such as Cosey Fanni Tutti, Pat Fish and Anna Banana. (81)

Home also identifies the influence of the likes of early punk novelist Richard Allen on the phenomenon (an essay of his in *Punk Rock - So What?* touches on similar themes):

. ..the influence of Richard Allen on the *blank generation* during their pubescence. Allen (pseudonym of James Moffatt) authored a series of *skinhead* novels for New English Library during the early seventies. The books, which chronicled the violent activities of white working class youths, circulated widely under school desks and the belligerent attitude they expoused (sic) was a central element in the punk sensibility...one need only compare the cover of

the first Clash album, or almost any posed publicity shot of a punk band, to the covers of Allen's books to see the extent of their influence (82).

Home also identifies the connection between the nihilistic mentality of a certain subsection of football supporters (the Man Utd fans' "we hate humans" chant in the late '70s) and punk music (82) - a context often overlooked, but a significant part of social cohesion for British working class youth at the time.

The independence and affirmation inherent in punk gave a sense of the sea of possibilities, not only in the aforementioned development of independent labels (e.g the case of Stiff Records, and the Buzzcocks' New Hormones) but also in bargain basement publishing and ad-hoc clothes design:

A Do-It-Yourself ethic prevailed with independent music labels issuing releases by *unknown* bands, a vast proliferation of the independent press in the form of punk fanzines (usually xeroxed in editions of a few hundred), and almost every punk making *designer* alterations to their clothes in the forms of rips and tears (82).

However, the sense of complete dislocation supposedly the case with punk rock culture wasn't ascribed to by all affiliated with the movement. David Thomas from Cleveland Ohio band Pere Ubu (and part of the pioneering American punk rock band Rocket from the Tombs) commented on the common narrative (encouraged by punk-era writers) on the excesses and bloatedness of rock music in the early 1970s:

The early seventies was one of the highlight periods in rock music. There was more innovation between 1970 and 1974 than ever before. There wasn't this narrow vision that has come to characterize things since. The only frustration was that we couldn't get gigs (*Totally Wired* 59).

In his interview with British writer Simon Reynolds, he calls attention to what he feels is a more Anglicised point-of-view as to the strict dichotomy between pop and rock, or between the supposedly mass produced and the work of some folk genius:

You want this separation of what you would call pop versus what you would call serious art. There wasn't a separation as far as we were concerned. We liked Marc Bolan as much as we liked Lou Reed. One wasn't intrinsically more serious than the other. This idea of pop versus art was alien to us (63).

Dave Laing views this more rigid rock versus pop divide in his *One Chord Wonders* as a byproduct of the end of the Sixties, when pop art splintered into the separate spheres (and sections of the record store) of art rock and pop (4). Punk was also the kind of "new sound" that A&R always want to hear; something which the industry was craving for (and this, in turn, explains in more detail how the co-opting of the genre occurred in time - not to mention the initial signing of The Sex Pistols to the largest record label by far in the country at the time, EMI):

It is certainly time we got a super new UK thing like the Beatles. The music business needs a shot in the arm. We are overdue for it. (Music producer Wayne Bickerton, quoted in D Laing 5)

Perhaps unlike the later punk rock phenomenon centred around retro inclined American bands like Green Day, the punk explosion in Britain was short lived and intense, as opposed to a prolonged variations on a theme for several albums - in this respect, the British labels didn't get so much of a good long term deal (however, they may have possessed the publishing rights).

## Conclusion

In a recent piece for the London Review Of Books, writer Ian Penman engagingly describes the dichotomy between mods and trads in terms of British jazz in the 1950s:

Modernists were wilfully brittle, stylish, working-class Cains, different in every way from the whoop-it-up trad jazz Abels. Trad - hugely and improbably popular in its day - had a predominantly middle to upper-class and purposively vulgar fanbase. In its rants were Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin and George Melly, who all later wrote of this time as of a lost Eden...Trads embraced a louche, boho scruffiness (silly hats, sloppy jumpers, duffle coats), where Mods dressed with considered exactness. Trads were British to a fault (real ale, CND, the Goons) while the Mods had a magpie eye for European style, from the Tour de France to the Nouvelle Vague. Trads followed Acker Bilk, Mods worshipped Thelonious Monk: even at fifty years' remove, you can see how sharing the



same club, city or country might have been problematic. If the Oxbridge Trads had a philosophical pin-up it was Bertrand Russell, with Freddie Ayer for real deep kicks; Mods backed the darker horse of existentialism. How much the Mod crush on continental philosophy was a pose, and how much serious engagement, is a moot point. Even as a 'mere' pose it's a very interesting one. In the dourly socialist cinema of the British New Wave, working-class characters are portrayed as sooty beasts of burden, life-force bruisers, 12 pints a night men; Camus rifling aesthetes are thin on the cobbled ground (25).

Excitingly and lucidly written, Penman's depiction of the Trads is evocative of a quote from one of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop as to the rather niche class appeal of their brand of political theatre: "we never appealed to the working class. All I could ever see were beards and duffle coats every time I peered into the audience" (quoted in Stuart Laing 98). Yet Penman presents a false dichotomy here, and points towards a wider tendency to abandon nuance or crossover when talking about competing subcultures. The fallacy of the term "socialist cinema" is belied by its apolitical tendencies and crossovers with experimental *and* popular/populist forms (as discussed in chapter 4). This rather absolutist, puritanical approach avoids the catholic nature of taste of – for example – John Lydon (who was a fan of Van Der Graaf Generator and sundry 'progressive' Krautrock bands) and his later Public Image Limited bandmate Keith Levine (a Yes obsessive). It also ignores the potential for crossover between divergent genres, forms and ideas – if one is a Trad, one must be a

logical positivist; if one likes King Crimson, one cannot possibly embrace The Buzzcocks – Camus and the Kitchen Sink do not mix. Continuities and contradictions will often co-exist, rather than cancelling each other out. In relation to this fact, Dave Laing identified the commonality between the emergent and residual tendencies in the form:

Pub-rock and glam-rock, punk's main musical forerunners, offered contrasting visual images. Pub-rock involved jeans and T-shirt (informal, reaction against superstar dressing-up) while glam, through Bowie, Bolan, Gary Glitter and so on involved virtually the opposite. Each was a sartorial starting point for punk bands. The Stranglers and The Clash showed an early penchant for 'working man' gear of various kinds, while The Damned and Siouxsie Sue (sic) opted for exotica ranging from Dracula opera-cloaks to fishnet tights (91).

If this analysis is followed, then the conscious lack of a constructed public image as evidenced in much post-punk fashion is more of a piece with the unsung, unpretentious pub-rock genre. And in contrast to the nihilistic overtones of the Sex Pistols or the CBS records funded rock star politicking of The Clash, Crass stand as a thread between the utopian tendencies of the 1960s underground, combined with active, lived political engagement:

Crass proposed a more direct confrontation with capitalism, based on an initial separatism...Crass were (and in different form, are) an extension of 1960s anarchist ideals, while not wanting to be seen as part of the generation of

hippies, who had failed to effect change. So if the Sex Pistols were at the centre of a social noise, Crass were the social noise itself – an alternative lifestyle, predicated on equality, responsibility for society along with individual rights being the message that could seem noise next to the mainstream signal (Hegarty 97-98)

Hegarty's analysis is predicated on the assumption of the utopian potential of noise, metaphorically suggesting an opening up of possibilities as opposed to their restriction. Thus punk cynicism can be seen represents a wide array of tendencies – fragmentation, disintegration, distortion; anarchy in the U.K, using the market economy. As well as the crucial importance of the public image: "A punk parading down King's Road with "SID LIVES" and a swastika stenciled on his black leather jacket caused no panic; he was a tourist attraction" (Marcus 117).

## Chapter 9 - *We Are White Crap That Talks Back*

The Fall, formed in Greater Manchester in the wake of the beginnings of punk in the U.K, were famously described by legendary d.j John Peel as "always different, always the same". From their foundations in 1976, the only constant member of the group is iconoclastic lead vocalist and lyricist Mark E. Smith. His original concept for the band as encapsulating "primitive music with avant-garde lyrics" has been the driving force of their output up to the present. They have also been the self-styled "white crap that talks back", a lyric taken from 'Crap Rap 2' on their debut L.P *Live At The Witch Trials* (1979). This chapter will look at the strange (and frightening) world of the Fall, with particular focus on aspects of their career in the late 1970s and 1980s. They are a band who, at various times in their career, have synthesised both relatively popular and unpopular forms of music (from punk and acid house to ballet and German art rock). Their lyrics are, by turns, obscure, obfuscating, literary, absurd and hilarious, making reference to a quasi-Kitchen sink (sur)realism as well as traditional "high culture" as such (the band's name is itself a reference to an Albert Camus novel). They seem, thus, to be a reflection of a post-modern approach to art, whereby work that transcends older cultural boundaries seeks to "penetrate the cultural Establishment by appearing to celebrate the artistic merits of popular culture, the mass market and kitsch" (Turner 77).

I will refer in this chapter to the lyrics and recorded output of the band, as well as

to biographical sources, Mark E. Smith's own self-mythologising work of 2008, *Renegade* and relatively recent academic analyses, focusing on the question of how do The Fall/Mark E. Smith fit into the cynic sensibility in post-World War Two British culture? My choices of music/lyrics to focus on have been made based on my own curatorial bias, which can only be considered a drop in the ocean, due to the sheer breadth of The Fall's discography – 67 albums and counting, released on a myriad of different labels. I think my chosen tracks act are, nonetheless, useful stepping stones through the band's multi-dimensional, yet strangely consistent, career.

The lyric referenced in this chapter's title underlines a key element of Salford band The Fall's sensibility from their origin in 1976 up to the present day. A self-defined collective of “white crap”, this is not a passive gesture, but serves to affirm the potential dissent and rebellion within the band. For an obviously intelligent band, it seems an odd lyrical gesture to make. Yet even in their earliest incarnation, The Fall resisted easy definition. The prevailing narrative of the breakthrough of punk rock in and around Manchester is based around the significance of the two Sex Pistols gigs in late 1976, early 1977. This has been further mythologised by the book and film *24 Hour Party People*, written by broadcaster, Factory Records chief and general maven Tony Wilson. Fall leader Mark E. Smith has resisted this spin – referring to the Pistols' music as “pretty bad heavy metal” (Middles 70), though he enjoyed Johnny Rotten's atonal, unconventional vocals. Similarly, the ripped jeans and piercings fashion aesthetic derived partly from Malcolm McLaren/Vivienne Westwood and partly from Richard Hell, were never seized upon by his band. Smith, according to Simon

Reynolds, “looked like a grown-up version of the runty schoolkid in *Kes* “(*Rip It Up And Start Again* 175). Indeed, writer and musician Richard Witts interpreted the history of punk unconventionally in stating that:

in the end it might be claimed that Van der Graaf Generator's appearance at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology on 8 May 1976 was more influential to local post-punk aesthetics than the Sex Pistols' two gigs at the Lesser Free Trade Hall on 4 June and 20 July of that year” (Goddard & Halligan 26).

Van der Graaf Generator, a British progressive rock mainstay in the 1970s, were certainly not then a part of the fashionable zeitgeist, but their experimentation was certainly imbued with a kind of iconoclastic spirit. Indeed, John Lydon had also admitted being a fan of the band. Witts also identifies the role that he and Trevor Wishart's Manchester Musicians Collective – a hotbed of more avant-garde experimentation – may have played in Smith's creative development. The free nature of The Fall made a considerable impression on Manchester's avant-gardists; Richard Witts again:

What fascinated Trevor and I was the way that those songs were not so much constructed as discovered, realized by the members working out through time random ideas that were connected only by the presence of the people in the room at that moment (ibid 28).

Mark E. Smith's autobiography *Renegade* seizes upon this also. "When you're dealing in slogans like The Clash and The Pistols, it's hard to keep that shit fresh...we weren't a punk band. That wasn't my intention (42)". Thus punk is equated with a sensibility that tends towards over-simplification, and an attachment to populist sloganeering; Smith readily dismisses all of this. Nonetheless, the implicit exhortation of Johnny Rotten's "no future" lyric in "God Save The Queen" was – borrowing Glasgow post-punk/new pop group Orange Juice's phrase - to "rip it up and start again". As such, possibilities arose from within this nihilistic sentiment for bands with limited technical ability to give free rein to their creative impulses, without regard for good looks or tight guitar chops. There is clearly a tendency towards rejecting rigid scene-based or genre definitions; already Mark E. Smith and The Fall's uniqueness is apparent.

Roughly contemporaneous to album *Grotesque After The Gramme* is the single "How I Wrote 'Elastic Man'" (1980). Allmusic.com writer Ned Raggett described 'How I Wrote "Elastic Man"' as the post-punk version of "Tradition and The Individual Talent" by T.S Eliot. Underlining this seminal critical essay by Eliot is the idea that newness in literary art can only come about after a through-going absorption of the classics of the past:

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own

country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order (Eliot 49).

Not only this, the previous classics of an art-form are “monuments” that “form an ideal order among themselves” (50) – somewhat of a daunting construction for any aspirant young writer to face up to. Aping older forms leads a work to “not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art (50)”; Eliot here further underlines the pressure of producing, or attempting to produce, the original, unique art work as he defines it. Lyrics describe being “eternally grateful, to my past influences, but they will not free me”, and seem like a distillation of the nature of personal artistic inertia (“I’m resigned to bed, I keep the bottles and comics stuffed by its head”) as well as fame and critical interest. “I am a potential DJ” seems to imply a sarcastic denunciation of the curator; the fact that the dj is only a selector of records means that he or she doesn’t have the ability to actually create. Thus, the artist-creator must always attempt to produce new work. Interestingly this clashes with later views of the likes of Brian Eno, who viewed the idea of curatorship as being connected with a new sort of creativity in the apparently postmodern period: “in an age saturated with new artifacts and information, it is perhaps the curator, the connection maker, who is the new storyteller, the meta-author” (quoted in *Retromania* 130). Walter Benjamin, in his essay ‘Unpacking My Library’ (effectively an ode to literary accumulation/consumption), fuses together the roles of writer and collector, no doubt partly based on himself: “writers are really people who write books not because they are poor, but because they are dissatisfied with the books which they



could buy but do not like (63).” This is another interesting view of what the artist represents - not necessarily a person of divine talents simply compelled to create, but rather a disgruntled consumer (effectively) attempting to satisfy a market niche. Smith's acerbic opinions on his contemporaries/near-contemporaries like Rotten, Strummer et al suggests this kind of dissatisfaction, and we do not even need to substitute 'writer' for 'musician' in the above quotation to suit The Fall – significantly enough, Smith has always thought of himself as a writer first, an ideas man, a non-musician. Interestingly, this type of self-definition has been shared by the aforementioned Brian Eno also.

Quite apart from the reference to dilemmas surrounding the nature of creativity, the song is also full of reference to the oft-dismissed world of comic books. In ‘How I Wrote “Elastic Man”’, Smith’s intonations in the chorus sound like he’s singing “Plastic Man” and “Elastic Man” at the same time, the title of a comic book created in the early 1940s by pioneering American comic artist Jack Cole. Cole committed suicide aged 43, *Plastic Man* being the work he is most famous for. He is venerated in certain parts of the comic book world:

Jack Cole’s *Plastic Man* belongs high on any adult’s How To Avoid Prozac list, up there with the best of S.J Perelman, Laurel and Hardy, Damon Runyon, Tex Avery and the Marx Brothers (Kidd & Spiegelman 7).

Operating in the so-called Golden Age of Comics, this was a time “when comics always traveled below critical radar”; the best work of this period offered “a direct gateway into the unrestrained dream life of their creators - lurid, violent, funny, and sometimes sublime (ibid 8)”. An early edition of *Plastic Man* from 1943, for instance, was inspired by Cole’s personal experience of child abuse, and contained a plot centred around wanton cruelty and child abduction (17). Self taught from teach-yourself drawing magazines, Cole’s own life seems to suggest a real equivalence drawn between himself and Mark E. Smith’s persona in the song. There is a suggestion in Spiegelman and Kidd’s book that Cole’s transition from comic book to *Playboy* comic strip writer became a sort of creative straight-jacket for his work, leaving less room for the “stream of consciousness” of *Plastic Man*, “allowing Cole’s id the license to ooze freely, and in its bounces and lurches Cole found grace and balance (127)”. Possibly Mark E. Smith’s interpretation would be close to this - the damaging effects of being trapped by past creative successes is the key torment for the narrator of ‘How I Wrote “Elastic Man”’. Around this time in The Fall’s chronology, there are other fusions of literary and comic book referencing in their lyrics. ‘Leave The Capitol’ from 1981’s mini LP *Slates*, aside from its central anti-London lyric, boasts a surreal bridge featuring Mark E. Smith declaiming, “I laughed at the Great God Pan (I didnae! I didnae!)”. Not only a reference to Victorian ghost story writer Arthur Machen (who wrote a long short story titled “The Great God Pan”), it is also the name of a 1959 comic strip by pioneering Marvel writer - and contemporary of Cole’s - Jack Kirby (Evanier, *Kirby - King of Comics*). These facets of The Fall point to what Mark Fisher

termed The Fall's "pulp modernism", a fusion of high and low references, inter-textuality and making the material as analysable as Pynchon or Joyce. As Fisher writes " 'pulp modernism' re-acquaints modernism with its disavowed pulp doppelganger" (96), re-connecting ideas to do with 20th century élite expression/high theory, with some of their less canonised forebears like comics, country and western music and Hammer Horror. Following on from this, "How I Wrote 'Elastic Man'", musically, is an example of what Mark E. Smith termed "country and northern", harnessing elements of the swing and twang of country with a somewhat noisier, post-punk edge. In retrospect, perhaps there is also a sense of this amalgamation being all the more appealing to Smith for it's heroically uncool connotations. His embrace of anti-hippy, but also anti-punk fashions in the late 1970s (this continues up until the present), and status as one few indie rock stars to shop for clothes in ASDA, copperfastens this.

Thus, a tension between experimental, avant garde tendencies and an untutored punk ethic exist within the band from the start. After a few years of being outsiders in the Manchester scene, their debut album came out in 1979. Cheap organ sounds skitters over the top of punkish sounding tunes ('Industrial Estate') as well as extended Krautrock inspired songs ('Repetition'). Stewart Lee describes the album as suggesting "magic mushroom tea drunk from a dirty pub ashtray...it doesn't taste very nice, but it's probably good for you (22)." After the more abrasive, scratchier sound of late 1979's *Dragnet*, the band was pointing towards the post-punk aesthetic of building from 1977's "year zero" aesthetic. 1980's *Grotesque (After the Gramme)* continued this trend, and marks the beginning of what many believe to be The Fall's

classic period. The second track from this record, 'English Scheme', is a sort of state of the nation address, critiquing the class system and, as one critic put it, is "a thumbnail sketch of the territory over which the class war was being fought" (102). Rather than simply being a rallying cry for the working classes or espousing an 'anti establishment' sentiment, it casts a cold eye over the whole class divide, and points to the general cynic's tendency towards the apolitical as manifested with *The Fall*. The perceptibly middle class, student based independent music scene seems to be a target - "the commune crap, camp bop, middle class, flip-flop, guess that's why they end up in bands"; thus, it seems unsurprising that the famously hippy-ish record label Rough Trade weren't a good fit for the group. "The clever ones tend to emigrate - like your psychotic big brother, he's thick but he's struck it rich" - emigration is an escape, but also to an extent an easy way out. Society isn't meritocratic in any real sense, but rather is based on inherited privilege, where an intellectually stunted relative has "struck it rich".

Later in the song, a character pops up - "the creep-creep in us all" - seemingly representing another side of pious left-liberalism. "Condescends to black men - very nice to them" is this character's patronising "right-on" attitude to ethnic minorities, treating them as a generalised type rather than as individuals. Contemporary political campaigning is alluded to - "they talk of Chile while driving through Haslingdon" (Haslingdon being a suburb of Manchester), cynically representing concern about the then nascent repressive right-wing Pinochet regime as a passing, middle-class fad. Turning back to the juxtaposition with the perceived realities of the working class,

Smith barks “you got sixty hour weeks, and stone toilet back-gardens”; images of inner-city realism cosy up beside suburban comfort. Smith's words also connect with the ideology of the significance of taste - “Peter Cook jokes, bad dope, check shirts, lousy groups”. Peter Cook, a legend in British satire/comedy and former owner of the magazine *Private Eye*, drew a considerable chunk of his humour from the perceived idiocies of the working classes (characters like Grole – see my earlier chapter on The Satire Boom). As a privileged, Cambridge-educated product of the middle class, Cook's humour perhaps at times preached to the converted – those who would have perceived the (comic) inferiority of “the lower orders”. Smith's line connects all four together – the (perhaps, but not confirmed) middle class taste group here is interested in illegal drugs, but not discerning enough to care about quality (“bad dope”). Fashion is important up to a point (I'm not sure what the significance of the check shirt is), but the reference to bad groups is telling. Tastes in consumption – from comedy, to drugs, to fashion – are all interconnected, and seem to mark the consumer and the classifier in a moral sense. Here, Sarah Thornton's work on club cultures is interesting. Thornton employs elements of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work on distinction to identify what she terms “subcultural capital” (11). Just as those people in possession of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital pride themselves on a refined appreciation of art, culture and bespoke furnishings, so the 'hipster' displays his or her subcultural capital through distinctive means, such as:

Fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections...just as cultural capital is personified in 'good' manners and urbane conversation, so

subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the know', using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you born to perform the latest dance styles (11-12).

The snide penultimate line - "it's a gay red, Roundhead, army career, grim head" - implies the lifelong nature of the "scheme". The Roundheads – the Oliver Cromwell-led Parliamentarian faction in the English Civil War – were noted for their intense discipline and regimentation. As historian Peter Gaunt noted of their character in a biography of Cromwell, the Roundheads,

would also tend to be strongly motivated by a belief that they were doing God's work and to accept more readily both self-discipline and the sort of tight discipline which Cromwell and his subordinate officers imposed (227).

The significance of Providence to this conviction, as well as the discipline underlined, makes the gaiety seem absurd; the English Scheme being a trick, informed by theological dogma, to make "grim" mundanity somehow bearable.

According to Mark E. Smith's account in his autobiography *Renegade*, this song attracted praise from lots of ordinary working class people. This connects with what writer and comedian Stewart Lee referred to the shift in The Fall's sound as turning into "kitchen sink realists who found Lovecraftian horrors lurking down the U-bend" (22); not only were they portraying a certain kind of working class perspective, they hit upon bizarre and unexpected horror and surrealism, rather than simply a dutiful reflection of social realism in verisimilitude.

After the aforementioned *Slates* and touring America, The Fall, now, unconventionally, featuring two drummers (apparently inspired by the Glitter Band), recorded *Hex Enduction Hour* (1982). Conceived apparently as a "big fuck off to the music industry", it was released on the rock label Kamera in 1982. Smith has much positive words to say about Kamera (*Renegade* 116), in contrast to his opinion on Rough Trade, where in contrast to nascent post punk stars, his labelmates included old school comic Freddie Starr, who released the forgotten classic *The Spirit Of Elvis* on the label in 1981. Lee believes that it remains "their greatest album" (23), as does Mark E. Smith. It is also one of their most influential records, cited, for one, by Stephen Malkmus of Pavement as being one of his favourite records. The apparent aping of The Fall's style on Pavement's early records incurred the wrath of M.E.S, viewing them as shameless plagiarists. If there is a sense in which Richard Witts' earlier quotation on how Fall songs seemed "discovered" by being played, it is on this record. There is an improvisationary impulse on this record which continues on follow up *Perverted By Language* (1983). The "idiomatic improvisation" (Bailey 4) of 'Iceland' is a track conceived entirely in the studio - the band quickly jam out a track with instructions from the band-leader, then Smith overdubs his vocal. Read purely as text, it works strikingly well; the first verse is an evocation of a performance gone wrong:

A plate steel object was fired,  
 And I did not feel for my compatriots,  
 Hated even the core of myself,  
 Not a matter of ill-health.

At the end of Side A of the original record is 'Winter (Hostel Maxi)', part 1 of a track ('Winter') which is about 7 minutes in total. It has a looseness which suggests the Bailey's improvisatory ethos, as well as Mark E. Smith's frequently professed hatred of musicians, yet the music is repetitive, slow and methodical. The lyrics and vocal delivery show a progression from 'English Scheme', where now he takes time over his performance. The words suggest a grim but surreal slice of life in the North, a continuation of the twisted kitchen sink realism referred to by Stewart Lee, centering on the character of "the mad kid" spoiling for a fight, yet looking like the "victim of a pogrom". There is a weird attention to detail in the words, perhaps to do with Smith's attachment to writing lyrics through "cutting things from newspapers". The "feminist Austin Maxi, with anti-nuclear, anti-nicotine signs on the side" equates activism with a certain kind of banality - the resolutely functional Austin Maxi car - as well as puritanism with regards to the ills of smoking (Mark E. Smith is an inveterate consumer of nicotine). Again, it is an impressionistic and wildly creative portrayal of a rough British Northern landscape, whilst seeming to be dismissive of political engagement, it does portray a sense of the after effects of the ills that politics can bring to bear.

The density of The Fall's output, along with its parallel immersion and relationship with popular culture, comes across well in this extract from an interview with Mark E. Smith conducted by Jack Barron in *Sounds* in 1983. It refers to the then latest single of the Fall's, 'The Man Whose Head Expanded':



It's about, like, this fella whose been fucked up by too much misinformation posing as real information. And then it goes into this thing which is an obvious paranoia trip where he thinks this bloke from a soap opera is ripping off his lines and writing them down. But his thoughts are too intense for him to do anything about it.

The paranoia inherent in the central character's predicament is combined with an obsessive relationship with the world of the soap opera; it leads, not into institutionalisation or action, but to an intense apathy, in some sense reminiscent of the blankness of "youth", as characterised by the Stephen Poliakoff anti-hero Leonard Brazil in *City Sugar*. He continues:

I enjoy the line about the 'Sociological Memory Man'. Did you ever hear those sports memory men who used to stand up and people would shout at them 'Who won the World Cup in 1920'? Now, like, you get sociological guys telling you about how many people didn't have houses in 1945 (laughs). But, ehrrm, we had a good tune, got rid of the melody and put the lyrics to it (ibid).

In the above quote, Mark E. Smith essentially derides elements of the tendency to accumulate massive amounts of statistics, equating the academic and non-academic tendencies to do so together. Right after this, he doubles back on himself, and self-deprecatingly describes the song in very functional, straightforward terms - "we had a good tune". Whilst being obviously intelligent, Smith does not want to be viewed as a self-conscious intellectual or po-faced, it seems.

Seminal rock critic Lester Bangs, when writing about mid-60s garage rock band The Count Five, in the eponymous essay of his collection *Psychotic Reactions And Carburetor Dung*:

It wasn't until much later, drowning in the kitschvats of Elton John and James Taylor, that i finally came to realise that grossness was the truest criterion for rock 'n' roll, the cruder the clang and grind the more fun and longer listened to the album'd be (10).

The Fall has seemed to unconsciously adhere often to this diktat, and would pay homage to this form of rock 'n' roll even in the time of their greatest commercial successes. After the artistic peak of *Hex Enduction Hour*, The Fall's sound changed considerably, after the arrival in the line-up of Mark's wife, guitarist/keyboardist Brix Smith and their signing with major label Beggar's Banquet. Stewart Lee identifies them as becoming a "successful alternative rock band" in this period – still outside of the mainstream, but beginning to appear more on television, and encroaching on the nether regions of the pop charts. At this point, their records boast more melody and more production sheen, though losing little of their caustic lyrical bite. Yet their first "hit" of sorts was a top 75 smash called "Mr Pharmacist" in 1986, a cover of a tune by contemporaries of The Count Five, The Other Half. Anthologised on one of Lenny Kaye's *Nuggets* garage rock compilations, The Fall's version featured on 1986's *Bend Sinister* LP (the title a reference to a novel by Vladimir Nabokov), recorded with big league producer John Leckie, who had engineered much of Pink Floyd's stadium conquering output in the 1970s. Seeming like a pretty straight-up homage to garage

rock progenitors, as well as the characterisation of The Fall as speed users, its muscular sound shows how the Fall's music had moved in a more melodic direction, and the cheap keyboard sounds from their earlier records is completely absent. Generic in some respects – like many garage rock groups, it aped the double-time breakdown of The Yardbirds' version of “I'm A Man” in the middle eight section- but Smith's laconic vocals add an uncanny quality to the tune. The song also oddly sounds more “live”, and the band's tightness on the recording corresponds to this.

In subsequent years, The Fall would chart with a cover of The Kinks' "Victoria", as well as producing a provocative crossover between ballet and post-punk in their collaboration with dancer Michael Clarke for the album *I Am Kurious Oranj* (1988). Stewart Lee characterised the impact of this sort of gesture in the context of the late 1980s, and also points to the general tendency within The Fall to transcend high/low boundaries. The Fall did not merely reflect nascent moves towards cross pollination between hitherto separated spheres of artistic endeavour – rather, they pioneered it.

Today, broadsheet newspapers are required to run reviews of the latest Pete Doherty biography, but in 1988 in highbrow circles for The Fall. The high culture/low culture barrier was breached, however briefly, as ballet dancers with bare backsides twirled to the title track's unusual fusion of offbeat reggae and seventeenth-century history (25).

Although it may seem an odd tangent to pursue, there is a quote of C.P Lee's about the Mancunian comedian Frank Randle which seems to fit Mark E. Smith's character

equally as well. Smith is a notably inconsistent performer; famously, gigs have been derailed by on-stage fights between band members, or Smith's inconsistent ways in performance - one night may produce a 2 hour long set, another night 20 minutes.

Why do fans wish to embrace such unpredictability? Lee writes:

Randle was, to put it basically, 'the people', he was his audience, or, at least, a manifestation of its mythical signifiers; his culture in microcosm: a mirror that reflected the industrial working classes' spirit of the time. For that culture was universal and not restricted to a language ghetto, a dialect of regionalism as it were (34).

Though it is obviously a mistake to draw too close a parallel here, there is a sense that Smith is tapping into the *post* industrial class environment, from the emergence of The Fall in the late 1970s and onwards. The "dialect of regionalism" referred to here can be seen to be in play also; The Fall have always been popular, to an extent, but certainly more popular amongst outsiders, or people who see themselves as on the periphery. It seems like the ethos of their song 'Leave The Capitol' writ large - reject the wealthy metropolis in favour of a rough, but nonetheless rich, provincialism. The significance of North versus South is paramount; as noted social geographer Dorreen Massey puts it, "questions of geography in the United Kingdom reflect, not just the formal relations of production, but wider questions of politics, power and social class" (Massey 295). Lastly, Goddard and Halligan identify key aspects of Smith's artistic persona as that of the:

Long-distance running of the Northern outsider. The immediate precedent could be said to be the Northern stand-up comic, whose milieu (the working men's club) was initially shared with The Fall and who unending, inexhaustible monologues seemed possessed of inner perpetual motion (8).

Randle - and indeed Alan Silito's long distance running hero Colin Smith - are welded together in this analysis. Comedy and the cynic sensibility thus once again collide.

The Fall's eccentric choices of covers, incidentally, are intriguing, as they have included versions of tracks by Sister Sledge, The Kinks, The Monks, The Beatles and The Move. Often they render the original song radically different, particularly in the case of their take on Sister Sledge's 'Lost In Music' and The Beatles' 'A Day In The Life'. Simon Reynolds writes, on the topic of cover songs in his recent book *Retromania* that:

In the sixties, cover versions had generally been of contemporary songs, a way for a performer or group to fill up an album...That began to change in the post-punk era, when covers were often chosen to express a group's sensibility or make an argument about pop history...Husker Du would signal the shift of post-post-punk music towards sixties influences with covers of 'Eight Miles High' and 'Ticket To Ride'. (134-135)

In this context, the argument about pop history implied in The Fall's covers seems to point to the unfair derision of the disco genre in covering Sister Sledge ('Lost In

Music'), as well as the hitherto referenced relatively obscure, almost forgotten garage rock and roll of The Monks ('I Hate You') and The Other Half ('Mr. Pharmacist').

## Conclusion

The Fall, still in existence to this day, represent an incredibly intriguing side to the progression of the cynic sensibility, remaining true to John Peel's pithy summation of their ethos. Maintaining a resolutely British (or more precisely, a Northern British) voice, their sound encompassed influences from a myriad of sources, both from so-called "mass culture" and high culture. Resolutely independent but also engaged with the pop world, Mark E. Smith's status as a popular culture icon extends beyonds his role as a songwriter and into his acerbic, often belligerent persona, exemplified by his autobiography *Renegade*, as well as innumerable fractious media interviews. Indeed, it has been a criticism that followed on from *Renegade* that "Smith is a lapsed sorcerer turned celebrated cabaret star, licensed fool on the BBC, licensed prole in *The Guardian*" (Mark Fisher, quoted in Goddard & Halligan 184); thus, it is suggested that his powers of creativity have been diminished to the point where he has, effectively, been co-opted in his middle age.

Lyrically, the band's depth of reference has been touched upon, spanning the tones of experimental literature, theatre as well as comic books and localised vernacular

expression. Within each of these elements there inhabit characters and different personae which give Smith the ability to adopt a breadth of different character voices, akin to a novelist. Rejecting elements of both the Tony Wilson-spawned narrative of the Manchester post-punk scene, the “Mad-chester” sound of the likes of Happy Mondays, and the rise of so-called “New Pop” (exemplified by the likes of Orange Juice and ABC, according to Simon Reynolds). This has lent credence to the view that The Fall are “unsubsumable within that most homogenizing and conservative of all sectors in the entertainment industry: pop” (Goddard & Halligan 7) - though this is not to say that they do not try to engage with pop, however, as already suggested. Owen Hatherley argues in his essay “The Fall, The Factory and The Disciplined Worker” that management theory, generally thought of as quite distinct from the milieu of the rock band, is intrinsic to an understanding of the functioning of The Fall, viewing the ideal worker as one who is completely devoted, largely unthinkingly, to the successful delivery of “the product” (ibid Ch 7). In this context, “the product” could easily be substituted for “the group”. In terms of the wider British culture of the time, there is an intriguing connection to make between the emphasis of Thatcherism on the value of business and entrepreneurship and the nature of the Fall was managed. Definitively organised around the vision of one “innovator”, the implications of the Fall, of course, presented a warped, depressed North rather than any ringing, utopian endorsements of where neo-liberal Britain was headed in the 1980s. However, their continued popularity underlines their relative success as a cultural business.

## Chapter 10 – *Somehow That Really Impressed Me*

In the following, final chapter of this work, I will discuss The Smiths. My work is essentially looking at mainly “documentary” culture as Raymond Williams would define it in broad terms; “the selective tradition”, more specifically. This chapter looks particularly at where The Smiths actually fit in within this in terms of popular culture. In my view, they represent the culmination of the cynic sensibility, achieving a balance between its Bohemian, apolitical and cross-cultural aspects. The Smiths, to me, appear to some degree encompass the voices of John Wain, Kingsley Amis, John Osborne, John Lennon, Stephen Poliakoff, Mark E. Smith and others. Each of these artists’ work appears in the context of some degree of British historical upheaval; even, at times, at points of crisis. For instance, Lennon and the Beatles reflect the rapid liberalisation of British society in the 1960s, as well as the maturation of the baby boom generation and the limits of hippy optimism. Poliakoff reflects a disillusionment with the hangover of said optimism in the 1970s, leading into punk and post-punk music. And many critics see The Smiths as inextricably linked with the deconstruction of the idea of Britain as ‘New Jerusalem’ by Margaret Thatcher’s government. Popular cultural critic Chuck Klosterman alludes to this fact: “In a decade categorized by excess, The Smiths - and especially their sexually baffling front man -were introspective, iconoclastic, and alienated (50).”



The somewhat Bohemian element of the sensibility, which is opposed to the conventional pursuit of wealth/material success which characterises British society, is embodied in The Smiths. This side of the cynic underlines that it is certainly not a monochrome, dull sensibility, but one which is ultimately creative, and sees the intrinsic value of artistic work in general. The characters portrayed in their cultural texts resist ascending the greasy pole, often drop out entirely, living either on the lower end of the socio-economic ladder. Like John Wain's hero consciously choosing unprestigious job as a window cleaner or hospital orderly in *Hurry On Down* in some respects, the characters in the lyrics of early Smiths songs 'You've Got Everything Now' and 'Still Ill', appear like drop-outs in the context of society at large. At the same time, The Smiths are apolitical, opposed to party political affiliation and displays a distaste for idealism in this sphere. None of the texts I am analysing in this chapter promote any political alternative to the Establishment or status quo. The best The Smiths can achieve is offering a fleeting release through a work of art, through individual, personal fulfilment, or through a transition from "skepticism to the sublime" (from the introduction to Larkin in the Norton Anthology, volume 2, 2566).

It is popular, and exists on cross cultural lines. So, Philip Larkin writes sophisticated poetry which reaches people in and outside of the academy alike. Likewise, The Smiths can lay claim to not only having the status of being a key band critical of the "Establishment" (for want of a better word) in the 1980s, but also being a successful pop band, appealing to a youthful David Cameron. Connecting with this is a sense of anti-modernism: from the Movement's dislike of "anything unusual" to take a phrase

from one of Larkin's letters to Amis in the 1950s, to Mark E. Smith's mission statement for the Fall's music as being "primitive music with avant garde lyrics." Their work, as John Harris writes, "unlocked a fascinatingly rich universe: Oscar Wilde, 60s English cinema, such authors and poets as Shelagh Delaney and Dorothy Parker", with a depth that belies their status as supposedly disposable pop records (Harris 373). Indeed, the crossing over of lyrical value from poetry into music was highlighted by Randall Stevenson in his literary history of the post World War II period *The Last Of England?*, pointing out that:

Straightforward, memorable lyrics that the later twentieth century kept at the back of its mind, or under its breath, were likelier to have been delivered by rock music than by established poets (186).

It is worth reiterating the importance of the term "cynic" in this context. Historian of classical civilisation Donald Dudley identifies a tendency amongst the original Cynics of wanting to convert the multitude to their ascetic way - "the Cynics were missionaries, and their message was that life could be lived on any terms the age could impose" (x). Yet, theirs was not a didactic message - cynicism strays from "involving any kind of political action on behalf of social reform (xi)." Both the ascetic connotations, as well as the edging away from political action, can be seen within the music of The Smiths. Modern philosophical cynicism as critiqued by Peter Sloterdijk in his *Critique Of Cynical Reason*, arguing that (post)modernity is characterised by mass cynicism, and the necessity for humanity to embrace the example of the cynics of antiquity. The archetypal cynic Diogenes is "impressed only by characters whose

presence of mind, quick wit, alertness, and independent feeling toward life are a match for his" (152). He also refers to an anecdote about Diogenes of Sinope, who, like Socrates, produced no writing of his own. One day, he meets Alexander The Great and is asked by the Emperor for any wish he so desires. Diogenes responds that he wishes that he would go away, so he would cease blocking the sun.

The Smiths produced four long-playing albums in quick succession: *The Smiths* (1983), *Meat Is Murder* (1985), *The Queen Is Dead* (1986) and *Strangeways, Here We Come* (1987), plus many singles, Peel sessions and resulting compilations. Their unique sensibility has earned variegated plaudits. Campbell and Coulter, in their introduction to their edited essay collection *Why Pamper Life's Complexities?*, proclaimed them "an affront to the values and interests of the establishment" (6). The New Musical Express voted the band "the most influential of all time" in 2002. Yet one of the consistently – and justifiably made – reference points for the Smiths is Oscar Wilde:

The spirit of Wilde permeates every nook and cranny of Morrissey's art and life which, exactly like Oscar's, have been successfully blurred so one is indistinguishable from the other (Goddard 484).

Morrissey spoke frequently about carrying around a copy of Wilde wherever he went ("like carrying your rosary around with you" - *ibid* 484) and specifically nods to the writer lyrically in *The Queen Is Dead's* 'Cemetery Gates'. It is interesting to consider some of Wilde's points-of-view in relation to The Smiths, such as art for art's sake,

treating trivial matters seriously and serious matters trivially and an unconventional endorsement of socialism as a means for man to become more wholly individual (the previously referenced 'Soul Of Man Under Socialism'). Indeed, *The Importance Of Being Earnest*, whilst being at some level a critique of upper-class Victorian values, owes its continued popularity, arguably, to the fact that it is an incredibly well-structured comedy. Michael Bracewell grouped them together as "England's underground analysts" (226) at the end of the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively, and I think that is a nice way of putting it. The song itself, whilst juxtaposing Wilde with John Keats and W.B Yeats (no doubt inferior poetic talents in Morrissey's eyes), also takes on critics, guilty of negatively piecing apart his lyrics. "There's always someone, somewhere, with a big nose who knows, who'll trip you up and laugh when you fall" was a line characterised by Johnny Marr as "verbal slap" (Goddard 70) directed at those writers/commentators who were perceived as looking for The Smiths to slip up. Eoin Devereux sees the song as intrinsically Catholic, and a byproduct of Morrissey's Irish parentage: "in the Catholic tradition, death and the prospect of dying are ever present" (Campbell & Coulter 71), explaining in part why Morrissey's jaunting amongst the headstones was, for him, "never done in any morbid sense" (Goddard 69). There is also the romantic image of Morrissey as the autodidact intellectual, indulging in his personal psychogeographical explorations in the graveyard, trading literary/historical quotations with his companion (apparently graveyard exploration was a past-time he shared with Linder Sterling and Howard Devoto), suggesting something of the Gramscian concept of the "organic intellectual"

(Joll 92). The figure of the “organic intellectual” is one who, rather than being a product of the traditional means of inculcation into the dominant/established “intellectual class”, comes to be through his own class background, and thus has a role to play in critiquing dominant values from his relative outsider status.

This image of the Romantic artist or intellectual is combined with a self-analytical impulse and reflexive tendency that Morrissey displays often in his lyrics for The Smiths, in the song ‘Bigmouth Strikes Again’, their tenth single, and taken from *The Queen Is Dead*. It simultaneously elevates and deprecates his role, beginning with his ironic self-definition as the ‘Bigmouth’ of the title, inspired by newspaper coverage apparently devoted to scandalising every activity Morrissey undertook or every remark he uttered: “The press are still not convinced. We’re still at the stage where if I rescued a kitten from drowning they’d say, ‘Morrissey Mauls Kitten’s Body’. So what can you do? (Goddard 32). The song’s lyrics include comparing himself with Joan of Arc being burned at the stake firstly, but in the next line debunking that rather extreme image with references to how “her hearing aid/Walkman started to melt” - both articles, incidentally, that were dear to Morrissey’s heart. There is a genuine grievance here that Morrissey possesses, against perceived ill-treatment from the media, but as often is the case, the critique is undercut by irony and humour.

Further underlining the Smiths bohemian aspects is the prevalence of the theme of dropping out from society, particularly in early Smiths songs from their 1983 eponymous debut L.P: for example “You’ve Got Everything Now” and “Still Ill” are closely related to this. In the former song, the abiding tone, both musically and

lyrically, is somewhat downcast, though not without a sense of defiance: "You've got everything now, and what a terrible mess I've made of my life...No, I've never had a job, because I've never wanted one." The "terrible mess" is, of course, a lament for lost opportunities, but this nestles beside the rejection of even wanting to enter the world of work. The more conventionally successful "you" in the title is also referred to as having smiled, "but I've never really heard you laugh" - somehow, conventional materialistic success (not necessarily fame, it should be said) is a con, and serves to reinforce the idea, intrinsic to the cynic sensibility, that engaging with the rat race is bound to end with a degree of alienation and loss of innocence. "Still Ill" strikes a far more defiant pose. Its key lyric - "England is mine, and it owes me a living" - was utilised by critic Michael Bracewell as the title for his book *England Is Mine*. Romantic squalor and imagery of industrial desolation coalesce ("under the iron bridge we kissed, and though I ended up with sore lips, it just wasn't like the old days anymore") in the track where Morrissey steadfastly refuses to explain his dissent ("ask me why and I'll spit in your eye"). According to Simon Goddard, it functions as a sort of manifesto for the purpose and role of The Smiths: "illness as art, rejection of mundane employment, [and] the struggle between biology and mentality" (418). Morrissey presents an outsider character, in this instance condemned by the pressure to conform to the rules of society in the early 1980s; with the passionate, romantic defiance, he renders his plight heroic. Again, as Goddard suggests, there is a critique of the pursuit of affluence within British society here, but it is akin to the critique offered by Sillitoe's hero Colin Smith in *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner*: there is

no thorough analysis and nothing particularly constructive in his rage, but it is nonetheless imbued with rebellious, spirited dignity. All the same, it would appear that choosing to drop out and go on the dole in the context of the economically gloomy late 1970s/early 1980s (particularly in the North) wouldn't have been that hard, but Morrissey also seems to have more elaborate plans. He seems transfixed on being an artist, and one which is popular enough to have the impact of his knowingly exaggerated self-definition as "Manchester's answer to the H-bomb" (ibid 218), potentially catalysing a seismic shift in British popular culture.

Margaret Thatcher's imposing figure in 1980s British politics is undeniable. A lyric from 1990s indie rock/folk band Hefner proclaims, "we will laugh, the day that Thatcher dies, even though we know it's not right." One of the few British prime ministers (or even heads of government, in general) to spawn an -ism, Thatcherism seemed to define the trajectory of British politics and culture in the 1980s. Acting as a British counterpoint to Reaganism in America, Thatcherism emphasised a sense of personal responsibility versus ideas of collective solidarity, the importance of entrepreneurship and business acumen to a successful economy, and the reduction of taxes and regulation to encourage said entrepreneurship, as well as to encourage consumerism. This represented a huge shift away from what, from the end of the second world war to the end of the 1970s, had represented the economic consensus amongst the bulk of the mainstream political parties in Britain, which had been concerned with state investment to stimulate demand, and for the collection of ample tax revenue during boom periods so as to safeguard against recessions in the case of a

downturn. In the new era, state assets were privatised, partially to finance tax cuts, and partially because of a deeply held belief amongst Monetarist economists that private industry was a much more efficient manager of resources than public.

Traditional family values were also a key component of Thatcherism - the promotion of the older nuclear family, and with the hedonism and apparent indulgence of the 1960s an effective lightning rod for her disgust at permissiveness, Thatcher evoked the staid 1950s as a key period before Britain lost its way. Ironically, her economic policy and polarising approach in government was a huge distance away from the so-called "One Nation" Conservatism in power in the 1950s. The Tory Prime Minister of the time, Harold Macmillan, referred to the privatising fetish of the Thatcherites as akin to "selling off the family silver". Thatcher's fight against the residual elements of heavy, state-subsidised British industry - particularly in the case of the Miners' Strike of 1984 to 1985 - earned her much admiration in certain quarters, derision and outright hatred in others. This was similarly the case with the jingoistic war with Argentina over possession of the remote colony of the Falkland Islands/Malvinas, which is generally attributed (along with the Labour party's divided nature at the time) to securing a huge majority for the Conservatives at the 1983 general election. Much of the damage wrought by her actions was concentrated in the North of Britain, further emphasising the move away from One Nation Conservatism - truly, Thatcherism seemed devoted to creating two distinct nations, with the Northern one a distinctly peripheral region.



Morrissey seemed to find a ready-made folk devil in Thatcher's divisive persona. His pronouncements on her in the mid 1980s are characterised by very little concession to tastefulness and are often hyperbolic in their disdain for the Prime Minister:

The entire history of Margaret Thatcher is one of violence and oppression and horror...I think that we must not lie back and cry about it. She's only one person, and she can be destroyed (Goddard 440).

He also lamented the fact that the IRA's bombing of the Tory party conference left Thatcher unscathed, wishing that they had been more precise in their targeting. This was certainly a decisive break from the general apolitical perspective of the cynic sensibility - no one, not even Johnny Rotten at his most iconoclastic, had directly wished for the death of the head of the nation's government. In terms of the lyrical output of The Smiths, there was no such direct calling out of Thatcher. Though he produced a solo track on his first post-Smiths L.P *Viva Hate* entitled 'Margaret On The Guillotine', nowhere in The Smiths discography is there a specific critique of Tory policy. Certainly there is an implicit debunking of Tory ideology of the time, as delineated somewhat in the previous section, but Morrissey's iconoclasm in this regard was generally confined to interviews with the media.

Yet much has been made of The Smiths political stance in relation to Thatcherism and the Conservative Party's dismantling of much traditional industries and unions, with the attendant anomie that followed. It is interesting to note that only once did

The Smiths perform at a Red Wedge (the political pop faction associated with Paul Weller and Billy Bragg, and explicitly affiliated with the Labour Party's 1987 general election campaign) gig, and one at the "Jobs for a Change festival" organized by the Ken Livingstone-led Greater London Council (Campbell & Coulter 26). Joseph Brooker's sees "an element of overgrown teen willfulness" (28) to Morrissey's derision of the Band Aid/Live Aid charity venture – the spectacle of cultural change, from the comfort of your sitting room. Moreover, I think this turn of phrase rings true some of his acerbic, media savvy pronouncements regarding the Conservatives. More potent in a sense for Morrissey was an oppositional point-of-view in the face of excessive 1980s consumerism. In this context, the title of 1985 Smiths L.P. *Meat Is Murder* was indeed provocative; "vegetarianism was another kind of anti-carnality, a virtuous refusal of flesh" (ibid 33). Brooker's conclusion is a powerful one, and serves to underline the political motivations, as well as the apolitical core of The Smiths/Morrissey's lyrics; it also hits on the value of their work as a cultural artefact which allows a window into the state of Britain at the time:

A considerable ego would not be swallowed by political imperatives. Instead it issued in a richness beyond the reach of its contemporaries, but vitally formed by the political conditions they were addressing. When the era's more straightforward representatives had dwindled to the status of amiable curiosities, what once appeared eccentric would be reckoned among the truest guides to its time (38).

There is another point to me made related to this on the apolitical stance of The Smiths. Much was made in the introduction to a recent book about David Cameron's professed Smiths fandom and how it reflected the fact that, in these modern times, you could get away with proclaiming such an allegiance without being in any way connected with the political subtext of the music. I don't think this holds much water - firstly, as I've suggested, The Smiths, whilst certainly being informed by the extreme political turmoil of the period, didn't adopt any kind of coherent political agenda, and, as well as being somewhat critical of the mainstream, also demonstrated a "new sound" at the time, which many writers have commented on, all the more striking for its contrast with New Pop's ABC, Duran Duran et al. Combine this with their ability to articulate the melancholy of adolescence and early adulthood with sensitivity and humour - it's completely understandable to see how Cameron could have been a fan. Popular culture, even if it is alternative popular culture, is not owned by one class or political group.

There is, on the other hand, a more subtle, implicit political stance adopted, no doubt at least partially unconsciously, by the group. Simon Reynolds, writing on 1980s British indie pop music - no doubt with C86 and The Smiths in mind - sees the genre as a "resistance to progress/complexification/technicism... (a) return to tradition, this coalescence is perhaps the first anti-modernist revolt in pop history" (*Zoot Suits And Second-Hand Dresses* 255). Previously, in a specific reference to The Smiths, he states:

'Youth' has been co-opted, in a sanitised, censored version, as a key component of the burgeoning culture of health and self-improvement. Desire is no longer antagonistic to materialism, as it was circa the Stones' 'Satisfaction'. So the most radical project possible in pop today in terms of maladjustment, awkwardness, introversion misery. Morrissey represents those who fail to live as the young are now expected, fail to have sex/fun/style (ibid 254).

In this context, the role of The Smiths - their name, their music, their aesthetic, their singer's proud awkwardness - is political in its subtext. It promotes maladjustment and revels in it. Connecting with the cynic's anti-modernism and bohemian attitude, this kind of celebration is subversive against the prevailing political ideology of conspicuous consumption of the 1980s.

As argued earlier, Morrissey's thoughts on Thatcher herself were expressed in often distinctly hyperbolic terms - the aforementioned 'Margaret on the Guillotine' was used as a working title for what eventually was released as *The Queen Is Dead*; often, such criticisms of Thatcher were contained in interviews rather than in lyrics. However, if overtly political statements and references to specific political/cultural figures *do* occur in his lyric writing, it is often of the "I'd like to drop my trousers to the Queen...the poor and the needy are selfish and greedy on her terms" (from 1985's album track 'Nowhere Fast'). In this somewhat juvenile style, subversion is mixed with a hefty dose of daftness and absurdity. The oft-cited lyrics of the opening track to *The Queen Is Dead* can indeed be poignant, particularly "the Queen is dead, boys, and it's so lonely on a limb", though I'm not sure if I am as enthused by the reading into

Morrissey's weird imaginary dialogue with the sovereign. For this writer, the main appeal of this song is the instrumental section, which is a brilliant group performance and drives the entire song - apparently Marr's intention was to create music which matched what he thought the MC5 sounded like before he'd actually heard them.

The inclusion of the World War Two-era song "Take Me Back To Dear Old Blighty" in the introduction to the song suggests Morrissey as less of a committed Republican, more of a flustered Englishman, unhappy at the passage of time and falling into a wistful nostalgia. It's significant that the things which are recited in the lyrics that are unpleasant about British society are "9 year old toughs peddling drugs" which, aside from being a comic exaggeration, is something the Queen has had nothing to do with and can hardly be singled out for blame for (she has been made a "moron" after all, to quote Johnny Rotten). It's hardly the role of a political engagé. Seeming to reflect a mix-up of what Raymond Williams would term residual, emergent and dominant cultures, "The Queen Is Dead" mixes archaic English music hall, American rock and roll, a plea for a lost sense of national purpose, tabloid-esque social comment as well as 1980s solipsism ("Life is very long when you're lonely").

As historian Raphael Samuel's suggests, "Morrissey's traditionalism allowed him to act as an innovator...the watchwords may have been conservative, but they were used for subversive ends" (343). The Smiths were embedded in a strong sense of the past, largely through their lyrical references and - by extension - the habits of cultural consumption displayed by Morrissey. The Smiths connected themselves, through their lyrical and musical references as well as their sleeve designs (carried out by

Morrissey himself) and interview statements to a recent past of British popular cultural references, from Carry On to Kitchen sink films to Coronation Street and early British rock and roll. Whilst to an extent as self-consciously monochrome as the cinema of Tony Richardson, the array of imagery employed by the band was rich and eminently analysable. Critics like Joseph Brooker (*Why Pamper Life's Complexities?* 37) have argued that this represents a retreat from contemporary mainstream 1980s pop (and, indeed, with a wider cultural shift from a manufacturing to a consumer/financial services driven economy) by identifying with a solidly residual element of British culture. I would see it as potentially more extensive than this, creating a new blend of cultural elements into a sort of bricolage of identity. One thing it certainly is, all the same, is anti-modernist. The images employed, as stated, hark to a broadly 1950s/1960s popular culture, recognisable to most of their own generation and perhaps exotic and weird to those who found it unrecognisable. And musically, Morrissey and Marr's influence, indeed the contribution of bassist Andy Rourke and drummer Mike Joyce, isn't to impose a self-consciously pioneering, avant-garde musical agenda (à la early 80s post-punk), but rather references back to other, recognisable sources. The 1950s crooning style of Morrissey as well as his emphasising of his Manchester accent while singing fused the influence of Johnny Ray with a Northern edge, the guitar style of Johnny Marr related to classic American rock music like The Byrds and the Velvet Underground, the funk and soul influenced bass playing of Andy Rourke was a clear nod to American influences, and the tight, straight ahead punk drumming of Mike Joyce underlined their punk lineage to an extent. Is

this a conservative move? Some would argue this, but as Simon Reynolds astutely points out, this is an upsetting of contemporary pop rules here, not only foregrounding the guitar but many (perhaps) nostalgic influences in the face of the sense of progression being in and of itself a “good thing” in the 1980s.

To return to the question of cover art - there are also references to iconic pre-New Wave French director/writer Jean Cocteau (a still from his film *Orphée* on the sleeve of the ‘This Charming Man’ single), journalist/novelist Truman Capote (‘The Boy With The Thorn In His Side’ 7”), Elvis Presley (‘Shoplifters Of The World Unite’) and Andy Warhol (a still from *Flesh* was lifted for the cover of their eponymous debut L.P). This moves away from the more generally British reference points and onto a less “ordinary” culture, certainly in the nod to Cocteau and Warhol. Like Morrissey’s self-defined literary lineage, this ties in with traditional ideas of high culture and enables The Smiths to be viewed in a more sophisticated light. But yet another “ordinary” element in The Smiths is their humour - possibly their poppiest single, ‘Ask’, is a yearning song which also has the brilliantly absurd couplet “spending warm summer days indoors/writing frightening verse to a buck-toothed girl in Luxembourg”, simultaneously celebrating and mocking the singer’s own sense of splendid vacational isolation. And the close of their most apparently “valedictory” album *The Queen Is Dead* is “Some Girls Are Bigger Than Others”, a song conspicuously not given much scholarly attention, has lyrical levity combined with very high quality musical backing and echoes Philip Larkin’s own poetic self-deprecation.

Though the desire to be well off and to ascend the ladder to success seems denigrated within The Smiths' oeuvre, the desire for fame and recognition rings through the band's discography. One of the key lines to b-side 'You Just Haven't Earned It Yet, Baby' is "all I wanted in life was to be famous", whilst the declamation, "I'd rather be famous than righteous or holy any day" on *The Queen Is Dead*'s second track, 'Frankly Mr Shankly' is both a statement of intent for Morrissey, and apparently directed at the real life "Mr Shankly", Rough Trade records head Geoff Travis. Morrissey needs an audience to be there, to fill a lack which creation of an art-work in and of itself wouldn't achieve - he craves the recognition and popular acclaim that goes with it. In this pursuit, he maintains his critical attitude towards the existence of "humdrum towns" ('William, It Was Really Nothing'), "beligerent ghouls" ('The Rusholme Ruffians') and so on, but needs an audience to connect with, to show it understands. Indeed, just as Morrissey idolised Oscar Wilde, so innumerable Smiths fans idolise their visionary; Morrissey himself even coined the phrase "Smithdom" to signify "a symbolic world separate to the rest of society, inhabited by the group and their fans" (Goddard 399). This created a whole other problem for The Smiths fanatic: as pointed out by Karl Maton, after conducting interviews with a swathe of Smiths fans, he found "in contrast to their expressed feelings of personal intimacy with Morrissey, fans' descriptions of relations with other people, even other Smiths fans, were often couched in terms of loneliness and isolation" (*Why Pamper Life's Complexities* 187).



Of course the references to sex in his lyrics point to a more liberal attitude to sexual expression, which excited controversy. And in considering the transition from a bedsit, dole-age philosopher to a rising pop star in 4 short years, the song 'Paint A Vulgar Picture' is interesting. Rather than describing the local, he targets institutions of record companies, responsible for exploiting/promoting (take your pick) The Smiths. Decrying the craze for reissuing before it really took off with gusto, it *is* ironic in light of later proliferation of Smiths compilations.

## **Conclusion**

The rather nebulous concept of 'indie music' has, in Britain since the mid to late 1990s, come to signify any band that features guitar as the lead instrument, rather than having any connotations of independence in its production, distribution or lyrical/musical ethos. However, in the 1980s, the 'indie' community as such seemed to have much more of a recognisable ethic, and The Smiths were a key aspect of this. Referring back to Simon Reynolds' analysis of the political implications of the group in opposition to the "technicism" prevalent in 1980s pop, many indie bands adopted a self-consciously outsider-ish pose, often elevating the shambolic and resolutely avoiding concessions to the mainstream. The Smiths, I would argue, were the most visual pop cultural manifestation of this tendency; however, the "soul" of this sort of proudly obscure music was contained within the so called *C86* compilation. Featuring

such resolutely non-mainstream bands such as Oxford's twee-as-hell Tallulah Gosh and Birkenhead's Half Man Half Biscuit, critic John Harris considers it "a crash course in the listening habits of the archetypal mid-80s indie enthusiast" (386). With its roots in the early 1980s "anti-macho, shrinking-violet stance" of Glasgow's Orange Juice, the so-called C86 had its fair share of detractors; even Harris can't resist a reference to the style's "bookish wimpiness" (386). The comparisons between this scene and The Smiths are interesting though, mainly for the fact that The Smiths hit the charts, whilst C86 bands generally didn't (save one solitary C86 alumnus - The Wedding Present - though they generally reached the lower end of the top 40). Straddling these two worlds, and still seen to retain a sense of "authentic" expression, was a notable achievement, given indie's congenital fear of "selling out". Obsessive subcultural capital about relatively obscure bands in this context seemed to be of paramount importance, as well as a dualism of cultural ordinariness alongside an extraordinarily romanticised, deeply felt attachment of their closest fans to the band. The Smiths, with this and the other aspects of my the chapter, provide a sense of the tensions, complexity and depth within the cynic sensibility itself, and, in my opinion, represent the apotheosis of its key characteristics.

## Conclusion

“Come, come, nuclear bomb...” (Morrissey, ‘Everyday Is Like Sunday’, 1988)

After the demise of The Smiths in 1987, the cynic sensibility largely fades from view, with few if any figures emerging within popular culture carrying forth the same key characteristics that the previous chapters have mapped out. Of course, Morrissey continued to pursue some of the same lyrical themes (such as the call for the obliteration of Middle English mundanity referenced in the epigraph), but in his pronouncements and artistic outputs from the 1990s onwards has tended to, on the one hand, focus on criticising the process of migration into the United Kingdom (causing some to label him as a neo-racist - at the very least he is guilty of gross nostalgia), whilst on the other gradually becoming more and more of a parody of his former self. Certainly in terms of his album and single output since The Smiths’ break-up has been of a uniformly lower quality. Yet one feels that in recent times, Morrissey has tended to rely on his past glories and past witticisms (as well as the die-hard loyalty of many of his acolytes) to retain his cultural cachet. Recent media statements as to the barbarity of “the Chinese” and “Canada” as a whole - due to their respective animal rights records - has reinforced the opinion of his detractors that Morrissey has travelled the time-worn path (shared by other cynics such as Kingsley Amis and John Osborne, to name but two) from youthful iconoclast to outright reactionary.

In the popular music world, the beginnings of “acid house” and the burgeoning popularity of raves pointed to a musical modernism which seemed a considerable move away from the more anti-modernist tendencies of the cynic. Critics who had extolled the virtues of The Smiths (such as Simon Reynolds) tended to tap into the sense of possibilities inherent in new, British-originated electronic musics like Jungle, which fused fast breakbeats and frenetic rapping, more often than not delivered in tones which were not nostalgic about a bygone age of Englishness, but rather internalised the new, polyglot multi-cultural Britain. Through the development of Jungle and its influence on the British rap scene, there is a connection to be made with the Kitchen Sink-inspired cynics and London hip hop artist Roots Manuva, whose album *Run Come Save Me* (2001) fused sampled elements of a myriad of musical forms with a lyrical sensibility that seemed quaintly connected a very English, cynical sort of realism, replete with references to beans on toast and pints of bitter.

In common to the reactions of the cynics in this book to the perceived malign over-influence of American culture on Britain, there was the loose sense of a movement in the phenomenon that was “Britpop” in the early to late 1990s. It entailed some of the nostalgia recognisable in the cynic; John Harris identifies the tendency for British musicians of the period:

Knowingly reconnecting their music to a fleetingly forgotten heritage, stretching from the rock aristocracy of the 60s - The Beatles, The Kinks, The

Who - to the more cerebral elements of punk rock and beyond. Tying together such influences was the articulation of quintessentially British experiences (xv).

Yet even though “Britpop” was supposedly influenced in great measure by the The Smiths - “their influence, though manifested in very different ways, was common to nearly all the groups” (385) featured in John Harris’ cultural history of the period *The Last Party*, there was none of the same complexity in most of its products. Societal critique, and the nobility of a Bohemian existence - not to mention even a vague tendency to engage at any level in their with politics - faded away, and the most successful groups of the era were Blur and Oasis. The former were characterised by their mutability and tendency to adopt broadly different stylistic guises in each album (in this sense, reminiscent of David Bowie more so than the cynics I have discussed), and the latter a fantastically popular group of working-class origins strongly devoted to consistently paying homage in their song-writing and public image to the twin godheads of The Beatles and Classic Rock. Jim McGuigan viewed this as a certain continuation of the commodification and exploitation of the concept of ‘heritage’ from the Thatcher era in an essay on ‘Cultural Change’:

Publicly subsidised culture was required to function more like private business and the Great British ‘heritage’, invoking nostalgia for the past glories of our ‘old country’, was promoted at home and abroad. When the Thatcherite project eventually faltered and collapsed, its New Labour successor posed the old cultural question of national renewal yet again but in a different way, in which

signs are more important than substance, by suggesting that Britain might be 'rebranded' as, say, 'a young country' (282).

These groups were commercially huge, and fed into a wider cultural phenomenon, connected with the mid to late 1990s economic boom, which seemed intent on hyping up the fashionability and “cutting edge” nature of contemporary British popular culture. In stark contrast to the articulacy of The Fall and The Smiths, “Britpop” groups - including the well-educated art school alumni of Blur - seemed intent on dumbing down, and thus popular music, from an ostensibly indie music milieu, coalesced with “lad” culture exemplified by execrable cultural phenomena such as *Loaded* magazine and Chris Evans’ weekly celebration of the moronic that was *TFI Friday*. Along with this, there was a lumpen, stodgy aspect to much of Britpop’s music, and cultural critic Owen Hatherley connected this with the conservatism inherent in its retro exercises:

Britpop was a reductive, borderline racist distilling of English - seldom Scottish, Welsh or Irish - rock at its most rhythmically inert and vacantly optimistic, alongside a new line Poujadist national resentment (5).

There is one exception, however, to this, and that band is Pulp, the only band lumped in with the Britpop scene (although they were a mite older than their rivals) to connect with the cynic sensibility. Pulp emerged out of the previously referenced indie scene of the 1980s, where getting a single played on John Peel might have been the full extent of an artist’s ambition within that milieu. Yet in the early 1990s, their

music somehow coincided with the general moves towards a more British style of expression being made by groups like Blur, Suede and The Auteurs. *His 'n' Hers* (1994) marked out the blueprint - glossy melodic guitar or keyboard-led tunes, without the sophistication of The Smiths certainly, but with an unmistakably strong frontman/lyrical voice in the shape of Jarvis Cocker. He fitted in with an idea of the self-created pop star, moved by success into the wider cultural sphere - one of the many youths who spent "their lives transforming themselves into characters, with countless hours in their terrace, semi or tower-block bedrooms devoted to achieving the exact conjunction that would make them unique" (ibid 15). The songs were largely stories about, and reflections on, British Northern life, gleaned from their origins in Sheffield. Cocker's attention to detail was there for all to see, describing in depth the unrequited romance between two bored teenagers in 'Babies', casting a cold eye on romance in an environment somehow redolent of British New Wave cinema - indeed, this sense of an observer's detachment made Cocker himself less easily conflated with the persona he was singing through. And where Morrissey's nostalgia generally harked back to the 1950s and 60s, Cocker's nostalgia seemed focus on the 1970s. In common with his cynic forebears, his approach "is never abstract, always a realist of some sort, however particular or unforgiving that realism might be" (4). After *His 'n' Hers*, their rise continued inexorably. Amazing in a modern context, given the pointed nature of the lyrics, the lead-off single from their follow-up album *Different Class* (1995) went all the way to number 2. The absurd and unexpected nature of this commercial success was crystallised by Owen Hatherley, in that "a group managed to

send a krautrock epic about class warfare to number 2, and then used this public goodwill to convince tens of thousands to purchase a despairing six-minute dirge on the subject of amateur pornography three years later" (4). Inspired by Cocker's encounter with a Greek student at St. Martin's college of art, the song sarcastically mocks her desire to be a "tourist" and "live like common people". The song didn't romanticise the working class; hedonism is portrayed as more a necessity than a choice: "you dance, and drink and screw, because there's nothing else to do". Indeed, "you think poor is cool" could potentially be a stinging rebuke to the music journalists feeding the hype surrounding the apparent standard bearers of "authentic" Northern working class experience, Oasis.

Much like the peaks of The Smiths' popularity, this song involved no dumbing down, and as Hatherley identifies, even served to ensure that the far less pop-friendly follow-up to *Different Class - This Is Hardcore* (1998) - got a decent amount of sales. Still, their moment of popular stardom was on the wane, and they went on hiatus after the release of 2001's *We Love Life*, before reconvening to join the reunion circuit in the last few years. Their final single - with the key lyric "a bad cover version of love is not the real thing" - 'Bad Cover Version' came with a video which seemed eerily prescient of the present vogue for X-Factor and other performance based music television. In presenting a pop video landscape entirely made up solely of impersonators, poorly replicating other people's gestures, it foreshadows the almost exploitative tendency to present ineptitude in a talent show format, purely for the cheap laughter of the audience.



It is no coincidence whatsoever that Pulp were from Sheffield, the provincial city that, perhaps more than any other in the UK, attempted to create a viable modernist landscape between the 1950s and 1970s, before the money ran out when the steel industry restructured itself and sacked most of its workforce, and a council attempting 'Socialism in One City' were squeezed of any funds (Hatherley 12).

Finally with regard to Pulp I would like to look a little closer at one of its lesser known songs. It is, all the same, one of their strongest. It kicks against the smug consensus which emerged in the late 1990s around the rise of New Labour and Blairism, the better turned out, more pleasant looking nephew of Thatcherism. Aspects of the Britpop establishment had, in the run-up to and after the 1997 general election had been in close contact with the upper echelons of New Labour. Even Damon Albarn, who later derided the photograph of Noel Gallagher of Oasis having a friendly chat with Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street, had clandestinely met Blair, Alasdair Campbell and John Prescott in spring 1995 for a frank chat about securing the Blur singer's public support/approval (Harris xiii). Pulp's 'Cocaine Socialism' - release as a b-side to *This Is Hardcore*'s third single 'A Little Soul' in 1998 - is a coruscating attack on this collusion between mutually vacuous pop and politics. The lyrics are a narrative about a New Labour figure inviting Jarvis Cocker around to Whitehall to "discuss your contribution to the future of our nation's heart and soul". Cocker's character remains impassive, whilst the politician offers him a line of cocaine, asking him "are you a socialist?" To be a socialist then has been rewritten in the late 1990s - it is now

connected to a hedonistic, arrogant complacency. The politician proclaims, “just one hit and I feel great, and I support the welfare state” - his espousal of apparently centre-left principles seems like an insincere throwaway; it’s only the cocaine talking. He attempts to schmooze Cocker by posing as a fan of his music, but he is a truly ruthless, Machiavellian character - “you can be just what you want to be, just as long as you don’t try to compete with me”. Thus, artistic integrity is all fine and good, as long as it’s the kind of art that suits the party’s pumped-up, media machine. The key closing lyric - “we’ve waited such a long time, for the chance to help our own kind, please come on and tow the party line” - is a mealy mouthed plea for class solidarity, but it rings hollow; the New Labour party line is clearly not synonymous with the needs of the working class (one of their first initiatives in government was to introduce Workfare, for instance), but rather a ploy. The double entendre is that towing the party line is also encouraging Pulp’s leader to do his share of cocaine.

In musical terms, the motorik, Krautrock inspired beat and epic sound make ‘Cocaine Socialism’ feel like a sequel of sorts to Pulp’s breakthrough hit ‘Common People’. Yet whereas ‘Common People’ critiqued the middle classes obsession with fetishising the working classes (as well as calling attention some of the more mundane unheroic aspects of the latter), ‘Cocaine Socialism’ directs its anger at the modern day Labour establishment which has seemingly left the working classes behind in pursuit of an ostensibly more compassionate Neo-Liberal agenda. The brilliance of this song is that it still rings true to this day, given the new fiscal austerity consensus gripping most of

the western world, often propagated by self-proclaimed socialists (in reality, centrist politicians at best) in the face of dire consequences for the poorest in society.

As a close, another aspect of the cynic sensibility in the period post-1987 was to be seen in the later work of The Fall, particularly in the period after what Mark E. Smith categorised as their “comeback” in 2003. Before, the Fall stayed in popular consciousness by maintaining their ridiculous productivity (albeit with even more wildly fluctuating and combustible lineups than before), but also gaining the dubious accolade of life-time achievement plaudits. In 1998, Mark E Smith received the terribly named “Godlike Genius” award from the *New Musical Express*; on grabbing it, he stated that the award should rightly go to the readers of the NME for their ability to read it cover to cover; Smith then pointedly left the award on the podium. This was no doubt a refreshing refusal at being co-opted when “coolness”, partly related to the NME-hyped Britpop movement, was used as a tactic for Labour party recruitment, Labour successfully coercing Creation Records boss Alan McGee and Noel Gallagher to publicly endorse their 1997 election campaign. In his book on *Status*, an analysis of the nature of how social status is conferred, author Bryan S. Turner refers to W.J Goode's idea on the need in society for awards mechanisms:

The existence of formal honours confirms the notion that the organization has the authority to give rewards...the social drama which surrounds the rituals of prize-giving dramatically contributes to the group's sense of integration and identity, while also reaffirming the value of commitment to the group (10).

In Smith's refusal to wholeheartedly embrace the awards process (though nothing compared to Larkin's turning down of the post of Poet Laureate), he is signalling The Fall's non-committal approach to "the group" or "the indie scene", so-called. It reads like a reaffirmation of his, and indeed the band's outsider credentials, twenty odd years into their existence. After the "almost hit" single of 'Touch Sensitive' in 1999, the 'Theme From Sparta F.C' represented yet again the mission statement of The Fall's "primitive music, with avant garde lyrics", with an infectious rock riff combined with words referencing football clubs Chelsea and Galatasaray, as well as the Spartans of ancient Greece. Mark E. Smith's vocals sound like angry declamations through a dilapidated public address system which, indeed, is as brilliant as it sounds. It also reached a different sort of audience by featuring as the theme tune to the BBC's Final Score football program. He also spoke in an interview on the same programme of the oft-ignored similarities between being a football manager and a band leader, and the analogies between the concept of a band and a team. Richard Holt writes, in the conclusion of an essay on the development of recognisably 'Northern' sports heroes/icons:

Individualistic sports like athletics or swimming seem to have been rather more appreciated in the South, where the Olympic ideal made more of an impact among the gentlemen amateurs. Although a sense of place was important in the South too, it was in the North that the idea of a team as the embodiment of civic or county identity and loyalty was most deeply held (160).

In a sense, the oppositional role of the Fall hadn't changed, despite sporting a completely different line up (bar Mark E Smith) to their original one. A great quote of Smith's on this phenomenon: "If it's me and your granny on bongos, it's The Fall." In the context of early noughties Britain, Smith saw "the rise of the S.S Frappacino", and his unique tone of delivery seems utterly at odds with the yuppy ideology of the contemporary era. In the context where "in October 2010, 60% of British artists in the UK top 10 had been to public school, compared with 1% in October 1990" (Hatherley 2), there is seemingly a network of cultural connections akin to a similar "Establishment" - if the term is not too antiquated to use in a modern context - which the Angry Young Men seemed to exist in dedicated opposition to. And opposing contemporary "cool capitalism" seems a just cause in this context:

Cool today is not only about black American culture; it is global and colourless. The sign floats free. And, key to the cool capitalism thesis, 'cool' has traversed the political landscape, roughly speaking, from the Left to the Right. It is now more a sign of compliance than of resistance (McGuigan 2012).

Where much of the works analysed in this thesis are, in some form, products of a cultural current which advanced opportunities for artists of working or lower middle class backgrounds, the smug fragmentation of "cool capitalism" has seemed to produce, in contemporary cultural terms, domination simply by those most able to afford engagement with artistic production. Raw dissent in relation to this is ugly, awkward, *unpleasant*. This also seems to be mirrored by the asset hoarding of expansionist, corporate neo-liberal capitalism; all the while, the 'shirker' is posited as

the folk devil on the shoulder of the morally superior 'striver'. Buffered by the power of consensual, hegemonic 'common sense', a direct line can be traced back to the core tendency of Thatcherism to view the running of a national economy as being synonymous with the management of household budgets. However, such a sense of exasperated injustice is not new; Walter Benjamin's Thesis VIII offers optimism and opposition in increasing knowledge and awareness – to oppose historicism, and to actively change history:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable (248-249).

In part, the greatest failing of the cynic sensibility is just this focus on amazement and unfocused dissent. In retrospect, a sense of idealism would seem far more constructive and progressive than a look back in anger.

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